



Katie

Orlan Orphans, Book 15

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Katie

Orlan Orphans Book 15

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Prologue

Aaron Cavett looked both ways down the corridor, then inserted his key into the lock and slipped into his office. As he shut the door behind him, he breathed a sigh of relief. He walked to his desk, pulled open the lowest drawer, and pulled out his lunch sack.

It had been an exceedingly long Wednesday at the Robert Ballinger Institution for Boys, the orphanage and school at which Aaron presided as headmaster. He pulled out the ham sandwich he had hastily packed that morning.

As he opened his mouth to take a bite, there was a loud banging on the door.

Aaron sighed, set the sandwich down, and stood up, opening the door.

“Headmaster Cavett! Headmaster Cavett! You won’t believe what I found by the pond!” Jacob Piper, one of Aaron’s youngest pupils, squealed. “Come quick!”

“Quickly,” Aaron corrected. He looked wistfully at his sandwich sitting on his desk, but followed Jacob dutifully. “You still owe me one page on how your actions yesterday affected your fellow students, Jacob.”

Although he was only six years old, Jacob was extremely intelligent. However, his quick wits were more likely to get him into trouble at the Robert Ballinger Institution for Boys, where Aaron served as Headmaster. Aaron did his best to see that Jacob stayed focused on his schoolwork.

Outside, Jacob took hold of Aaron’s hand and tugged him toward the pond on the outskirts of the school’s property, near the woods. Aaron shivered and wished he had thought to bring his coat. “Hurry, Jacob. I have work to do.”

Aaron made it a point not to choose favorites, but it was difficult not to have a soft spot for Jacob. He was precocious and funny, and despite his proclivity to find himself in trouble, Aaron knew the boy had a good heart.

Jacob pointed to a rustling near the edge of the pond. “Look! Look!”

Aaron peered at the spot where he'd seen movement. "What is it?"

Jacob bent down and plunged his hand into a pile of leaves. When his arm emerged, he held a skinny frog, its legs protruding from his hand. "It's my new pet! His name is Freddy!"

Aaron shook his head sternly. "Jacob! You know pets are not permitted on the grounds. Put that poor creature back and let's get back inside. We'll both catch cold in this weather."

Jacob looked up at Aaron, eyes beseeching. "Please, Headmaster? I'll take care of him and feed him and take him for walks."

"I don't think frogs—" Aaron began.

"Headmaster, you're always saying I need to focus. I think having a pet would make me focus. And you could take him away from me if I misbehaved. Please, Headmaster Cavett? Please?" Jacob begged.

Aaron fought the urge to laugh. It would be highly inappropriate, given his position as headmaster. He needed to lay down the law. But something inside him made him want to go easy on Jacob. And the boy did have a point. Aaron welcomed anything that would help the boy focus on his lessons.

Aaron pursed his lips. "I'm not sure."

"The code of conduct says no dogs, cats, fish, rabbits, or turtles are permitted," Jacob pointed out. "Frogs are not mentioned."

Aaron sighed. Ever since he'd taught Jacob to read, the boy read anything he could get his hands on—and somehow, it always ended up coming back to haunt Aaron. "Fine, Jacob. You may keep him for now. We'll assess later this week whether or not you can keep him."

"Oh, thank you, Headmaster Cavett! You're my favorite Headmaster of all time!" Jacob jumped up and down, still holding the squirming frog. "Oh, Freddy, we'll be best friends!"

"Back inside before we freeze to death, Jacob," Aaron instructed.

Jacob could tell that his headmaster meant business, so he followed him back into the imposing brick building.

As they passed through the halls, Aaron noticed something strange. The halls were empty. The boys should have been returning from their lunch break and re-entering their classrooms. He quickened his pace, looking into every classroom to check.

As he turned to explore another corridor, a gangly body flew into him.

Aaron gasped and staggered back. He took a deep breath and straightened himself, frowning. "No running in the hallways!"

Jenkins, one of the oldest boys, stood up straight and looked Aaron in the eye. "Yes, sir. I'm very sorry, sir. I wanted to make sure I could take my books with me to Texas!"

"Texas?" Aaron furrowed his brow, feeling exhausted. What kind of new prank were the boys up to? His stomach growled, and he

remembered his forgotten ham sandwich.

“Mr. Ballinger just told us that he sold the building, sir. We’re being sent to a different orphanage, one in Texas. We have to pack by nightfall!” Jenkins said, panting for breath.

“Jenkins, now is not the time for jokes or lies,” Aaron chided.

“Oh, I’m not joking, sir. You can ask Mr. Ballinger himself. Here he comes. I’m off to pack, sir! I don’t want the bus to leave me behind!” As Aaron watched Jenkins speed away, he noticed Lazarus Ballinger creeping toward the exit.

“Mr. Ballinger!” Aaron called, running toward the older man.

Lazarus turned around and let out a loud exhale which shook his thunderous body. “Headmaster Cavett.”

Lazarus Ballinger’s father, Robert, had started the Institution for Boys three decades earlier. In addition to being a school, it was also a home for orphaned boys and young men. Robert had been a loving and generous man, and the school had flourished under his attention. Since Robert had died and left the business to his son, Lazarus, however, things had changed. Lazarus was obsessed with money. He forced the orphans to work to earn their keep, but everyone suspected that he pocketed the leftover payments.

Aaron didn’t like Lazarus, but he was technically his boss. Still, what Jenkins had said didn’t make any sense. “Jenkins said you sold the building. Is that true?”

Lazarus frowned. “Yes. I arranged for the orphans to be sent to another home for boys in Texas. Cost me far too much, but there’s a bus that will be arriving this evening to take you all there.”

“Me, too?” Aaron asked, baffled.

Lazarus sighed, looking at the watch on his rotund arm. “The boys need a chaperone. Obviously, it’s you.”

“And my job?” Aaron felt his head start to spin. Was this Lazarus’s way of telling him he had been let go?

“You’re a good employee, Aaron. I’ll find a job for you in one of my other businesses when you come back,” Lazarus assured. “Good day.”

Lazarus trudged down the hallway, leaving Aaron standing, his jaw agape.

Jacob ran past Aaron. “Headmaster Cavett! We’d better get moving. You don’t want the bus to leave without you, do you?”

Chapter One

Katie Sanders hummed to herself as she corrected quizzes at her desk. The students had clearly been paying attention to Miss Carroll, the schoolteacher in Nowhere's one-room schoolhouse. Katie was relieved that she would get to share a positive result with the students. She hated breaking the news when the students didn't pass their quizzes. It always made her feel guilty, like she was letting them down.

Apart from that, Katie loved her job at the schoolhouse. She had worked there ever since her sister Theresa had married and adopted infant twins. Katie was now the only one of her sisters who was unmarried and living at home with their adoptive parents, Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders.

Katie, Theresa, and the others had grown up in Orlan, New York. One day, the church board that ran the orphanage ruled that it was not appropriate for girls and boys to live under the same roof. They put the fifteen female orphans on a bus with their matron, Cassie Morgan, and traveled to Texas.

When they arrived in the small town of Nowhere, they learned that there had been a mix-up—there was no home for girls in town. Fortunately, Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders, a couple who'd married late in life and had no biological children, had been willing to take in all fifteen girls. Edna Petunia and Cletus lived comfortably in a large house and their means meant that none of the girls ever wanted for anything as they grew up.

Edna Petunia and Cletus made sure that each of the girls earned her keep. Before they married, the girls were responsible for working either inside or outside the home. Katie had been content doing chores around the house and helping Edna Petunia prepare meals, but now that she had a job outside of the house, she realized what she had been missing for all those years.

Katie watched through the window as the children played in the afternoon sun. She loved working at the school and shaping young minds. The children she worked with were smart, curious, and kind. She felt honored to help teach them their lessons. Miss Carroll was

sweet and kind, too. Katie loved working with her.

The only real thing missing in Katie's life was a suitor. She had watched and waited patiently as each of her older sisters had married one by one. Even though there were a few sisters whose personalities made the family question if they'd ever get married, each sister had found a man who complemented her perfectly. Prim and righteous Sarah Jane had married the town pastor, Micah. Bookish Gertrude had hit it off with freewheeling Jedediah, proprietor of a traveling book wagon. Even by-the-book Hope had settled down with Stephen Bennett, one of the town's two doctors.

Katie sighed as she thought about her sisters and their husbands. Would her time ever come? Single men in Nowhere were as scarce as snow in Texas. They weren't typically found, and even when they were, they were few and far between.

Katie dreamed of getting married as her sisters had. She envisioned a big church wedding, with a flowing dress, beautiful flowers, and her family by her side. The only thing she couldn't picture was the groom. There were simply not enough eligible young men in Nowhere. When Katie complained about this to her adoptive mother, Edna Petunia waved her away and said her time would come. But Katie was starting to question whether Edna Petunia was right about that.

Still, Katie loved her life in Nowhere. It was so much more interesting and exciting than her childhood in the orphanage in New York. Although Katie had always been a happy child, she had craved a family of her own. Now, thanks to Edna Petunia and Cletus's love and her sisters' marriages and children, she had that. Even if she never married, she had felt lucky to have experienced the joy of a tight-knit, supportive family.

Miss Carroll cleared her throat. "Recess is over."

Katie smiled at Miss Carroll and stood to walk outside the schoolhouse. "Time to come back inside, children!"

The students began scurrying into the classroom.

In the distance, Katie saw a bus approaching the school. She frowned. All of the students were present. She went inside the classroom, where Miss Carroll was about to start the lesson. "Are you expecting any deliveries or visitors today?"

Miss Carroll shook her head. "No. Why?"

Katie pointed at the window. "There's a bus on its way here!"

The children raced from their seats to the window to look.

"Children!" Miss Carroll scolded, but she walked to the window, too.

The bus drew closer.

"Who could that be?" Katie wondered out loud.

"Back to your seats," Miss Carroll instructed, and the children

begrudgingly returned to their desks. Miss Carroll walked over to Katie and lowered her voice. "Will you please find out who they are and what they want?"

Katie nodded and went outside the schoolhouse. The bus pulled to a stop a few feet away, and young men and boys began filing out one by one, dragging large trunks and suitcases.

Katie looked around in confusion as the boys streamed around her, laughing and shouting.

A small boy of no more than six with merry eyes walked up to Katie. "Excuse me, Miss, can you show me to the bunks, please?" He carried a bag that was nearly larger than he was as well as a hat box with holes poked in it.

"There are no bunks here," Katie replied gently. "This is a school."

The boy laughed. "I know that! It just looks smaller than our old school."

Finally, a tall, handsome man strode in front of Katie. He peeled off his gloves and looked around inquisitively. "I'm Aaron Cavett, the headmaster. Is the dormitory in this building, too?"

Katie felt her heart leap into her throat, pounding faster than ever before. She couldn't string words together to form a complete sentence. All she could do was stare. "Dormitory?"

Aaron sighed and looked pointedly at the small structure. "The only address I was given was for this school house. If the living quarters are elsewhere, we'll need to discuss it with the bus driver. He hasn't been paid for an additional destination." He turned to the bus, where the driver waited. "Can you please stay until we get things straightened out?"

The bus driver grunted in response.

Katie finally collected her wits. "Excuse me, Mr. Cavett, but what are you referring to?"

Some of the boys had stacked suitcases and trunks in a large heap and were beginning to climb on them. Aaron put a hand up and looked them all in the eyes, and they stopped immediately. Katie was impressed at his easy command of the group. Aaron turned his attention back to Katie. "This is the group of orphans who will be living and studying here."

The more Aaron spoke, the more befuddled Katie became. "What group of orphans?"

"This group of orphans," Aaron said, clearly frustrated. "Who's in charge here?"

Miss Carroll came outside. "Is there a problem? What are all these boys doing here in the middle of the day?"

"I'm Aaron Cavett," Aaron said impatiently. "Headmaster of the former Robert Ballinger Institution for Boys in New York. My

employer, Lazarus Ballinger, made arrangements for our young men to transfer to your school. I understand that you also run an orphanage, with dormitories for the boys on the premises. I just can't seem to understand where they might be." Again, Aaron looked around, seeming unimpressed with the small building.

Miss Carroll shook her head. "Mr. Cavett, I'm afraid there's been some type of mistake. This is a school house, but we do not have dormitories on site. There's no orphanage in this town."

Just then, the bus driver grew tired of waiting. He started the engine and drove the bus off into the distance. Aaron's face went white as a sheet. He looked around at all of the boys. "What am I to do with all of these boys?"

Chapter Two

“Order!” Cletus Sanders shouted, pounding his gavel on his desk. More than half of Nowhere’s residents were crowded into town hall, debating what to do about the abandoned orphans.

In a corner of the room, Aaron shook his head wearily. He hadn’t slept for days, and there was no sign of a resolution. He had no idea where he and the boys would be staying that evening. He had left them at the schoolhouse under Miss Carroll and Katie’s attention while he had walked to the town hall to discuss the situation with the residents of Nowhere.

He didn’t understand, but somehow word had spread throughout the town in less than an hour that a busload of orphans had materialized. He had tried to get a message to Lazarus Ballinger to get to the bottom of the predicament, but Mr. Ballinger was unreachable. *Typical*, Aaron thought to himself. Mr. Ballinger never wanted to assume responsibility.

As best he could tell, someone in Mr. Ballinger’s office had talked to a man in Oklahoma who had a cousin in Nowhere who ran an orphanage. That was what Aaron understood to be true, but clearly, the message had been distorted somewhere along the line.

The end result was that Aaron and fifteen boys ranging from six to sixteen were now stranded in Nowhere with no money, no place to stay, and no means of transportation. Aaron couldn’t believe he had so blindly accepted Mr. Ballinger’s order to get onto the bus with the boys. He blamed himself for not fighting back against Mr. Ballinger’s request. If they had never gotten on that bus, Aaron would have probably lost his job, but at least they wouldn’t be stuck in Texas.

“There’s simply no room in that school house,” Gerald Sibley, the town banker, pointed out. “We should split them up and they can work to earn their keep.”

A gray-haired woman stood up and put her hands on her hips. “That’s no way to welcome a bus full of bastards into our town!”

A murmur rippled through the crowd. “Who is that?” Aaron whispered to the woman sitting next to him.

The woman grinned at him. “That’s Edna Petunia Sanders. She’s

Cletus's wife—and my adoptive mother. I'm Ruby Darcy, pleased to meet you."

"Aaron Cavett. Sanders—any relation to the young woman at the school? I thought she said her name was Sanders, too," Aaron recalled.

Ruby's mouth stretched into an even wider grin. "That would be my youngest sister, Katie Sanders. The sweetest of the whole bunch!"

Aaron blushed, but he wasn't sure why. He knew he should be focusing on the proceedings, not being distracted by gossip, but something inside him was burning for more information about the young woman he'd met that morning. "How many are there?"

"Fifteen in total," Ruby replied, enjoying the shocked expression on Aaron's face.

"Pardon me for sounding intrusive, but you don't look much like Katie," Aaron remarked.

Ruby laughed. "We're all orphans with different birth parents. Well, except my twin and I—Opal. You'll meet all of us if you stick around here long enough. It's actually funny, because the way we ended up in Nowhere isn't too different than the way you and your boys did. We took a bus and there was some fiasco about our living arrangements. It all worked out for us—Edna Petunia and Cletus adopted all of us!"

Aaron nodded, taking this all in. He couldn't believe the coincidence. Before he could comment further, a disagreement broke out.

Cletus banged the gavel again, but people were out of their seats, shouting at each other.

Ruby shook her head. "I'm sorry you have to witness this. We're usually much more civil. I guess tensions are high with winter coming and everyone preparing for the seasons to change."

"I just want to know if the boys are going to have a roof over their heads tonight," Aaron admitted.

Ruby's face grew serious. "Aaron, trust me, there's no way that me or my family would leave you to fend for yourselves. I'm sure we'll figure something out."

"Thank you, Ruby. I appreciate that," Aaron said.

Micah Barton stood up. "Everyone, please, quiet!" In an instant, the room hushed. No one had ever heard the mild-mannered pastor raise his voice before. "It seems to me the immediate need is where the boys and their teacher will stay. They can stay at the church until we figure out a more permanent solution. There's plenty of space most of the week, and they can help prepare for services on Sunday."

The crowd broke into chatter, and Aaron felt a small sense of relief. His eyelids felt heavy and he had a hard time staying upright.

Sleeping at the church would be wonderful.

In a few minutes, there was consensus. Aaron and his pupils would stay at the church until further notice. A lovely blonde woman approached Aaron as the meeting broke up. "I'm Sarah Jane Barton, Micah's wife. It's a pleasure to meet you," she said warmly.

"Thank you very much for your hospitality," Aaron said politely. "I can't tell you what a relief it will be to have a place to sleep tonight. We didn't get much rest on the bus, I'm afraid."

"Oh, you poor things! We'll get you a hot meal and then you can rest up. I know my children will love having a few extra playmates," Sarah Jane beamed.

"Thank you," Aaron repeated. He felt sorry he couldn't carry on a more intelligent conversation, but his entire body felt drained. "I suppose I need to make my way back to the schoolhouse."

"We'll give you a ride!" Sarah Jane exclaimed. "One of my other sisters is watching the children right now, so we have time to take you to the schoolhouse and then transport all of you back to the church with us. Oh, wait a minute." Sarah thought about something for a moment. "I forgot how many there are. Ruby, do you think you and Lewis could help us?"

"Of course!" Ruby agreed. "I'll talk to Cletus and Edna Petunia. I'm sure they'll help, too."

Aaron was amazed at how willing Ruby and her family members were to help him. He was a stranger and an outsider, yet they had no reservations about lending a hand. "I don't know how I'll be able to repay you."

"Don't mention it," Ruby said as she walked over to talk to Cletus and Edna Petunia.

A few moments later, Aaron rode in Cletus's wagon next to Edna Petunia. He watched as she pulled a peppermint candy from her chest and held it out to him. "You look like you haven't eaten much in days."

Edna Petunia was right. Aaron's stomach growled as he tried not to show his horror on his face. He was starving, but he wasn't so desperate that he'd accept a peppermint stick from a woman's bosom. And although he was shocked by Edna Petunia's brazen antics, he also could tell the woman was coming from a place of love and support. He shook his head in amazement as the wagon continued toward the school.

Once they arrived, Aaron helped Edna Petunia out of the wagon.

"Oh, my. You're making me blush!" Edna Petunia exclaimed. She swatted his arm lightly, and Aaron felt his cheeks redden. "Next time I'll aim for your behind," Edna Petunia joked. Or at least, Aaron hoped she was joking.

Sarah Jane climbed out of her wagon and explained the situation to Katie and Miss Carroll.

Aaron cleared his throat. "All boys six through eight will travel with me. Boys nine through twelve will go with Mr. and Mrs. Darcy. Boys aged thirteen and up will go with Pastor and Mrs. Barton.

Katie watched as the boys quickly grabbed their luggage and began loading it into the wagons. Once all the bags had been packed, Lewis, Ruby, Micah, and Sarah Jane helped the boys get in.

There was an open spot in Edna Petunia and Cletus's wagon, and Edna Petunia waved her arms at Katie. "Don't just stand there, silly! You'd better come with us, too!"

Katie looked back at the school house. Lessons were over and the children had gone home, but she thought Miss Carroll might still need her help.

Miss Carroll looked up at Katie and smiled. "She's right. You should go with them and help them settle in. I'll be fine here."

Katie nodded and climbed into the Sanders family wagon. As she took her seat, her legs brushed up against Aaron's, and Katie's entire face flushed. Her pulse raced and her palms grew clammy. Although she had only met him hours before, Aaron Cavett had a strong effect on Katie. She felt most peculiar, as if a spell had been cast over her. Was she allergic to him?

Aaron shifted in his seat so his legs would no longer touch Katie's. She was certainly lovely, and seemed like a sweet girl, but he couldn't allow any distractions. He would find all of the boys permanent placements and then he would find a ride back to New York. He couldn't wait to confront cowardly, greedy Lazarus Ballinger once and for all. But first, he had to ensure that the boys were well-cared for and had proper homes and plans for school.

When they pulled up in front of the church, Aaron's heart sank. The church didn't seem big enough to house fifteen boys and their lanky headmaster. But he couldn't afford to be choosy. They had no other options.

Edna Petunia winked at Aaron as he helped her out of the wagon. Aaron lowered his voice as he helped Katie out, too. "Is your mother, er, is she—" He couldn't find the right words.

Katie threw her head back and laughed. "She's one of a kind. She means well, and that's all you need to know."

Aaron nodded even though he didn't completely understand and waited as the boys climbed out of their wagons, unloaded their luggage, and raced toward the church structure.

Micah opened the doors and ushered the boys inside. Aaron realized the building went further back than he had anticipated, and he was grateful that it seemed the structure could accommodate all

the boys after all.

Jacob began running through the aisles, but paused when Aaron let out a sharp whistle. "Jacob!"

Jacob slowed down and looked sheepishly up at Aaron. "I'm sorry, Headmaster."

Aaron set his lips in a tight line. "We are Pastor Barton and Mrs. Barton's guests. We need to treat their home with respect."

"Yes, Headmaster." Jacob smiled and Aaron fought to keep his lips from curving upward as well.

"I'm going to make a stew and some bread for dinner to feed the troops," Sarah Jane explained. "We'll eat in our living quarters, which are attached to the church. We have some sheets and blankets and the boys can each take a pew."

"Thank you," Aaron said, still feeling uncomfortable at how much generosity the family was showing him.

Sarah Jane and Ruby disappeared into the living quarters. Edna Petunia, Cletus, Lewis, and Micah followed. A few minutes later, Ruby returned with sheets and blankets. Aaron and Katie passed them out and helped the boys set up makeshift beds in the pews.

"What do you say to Miss Sanders for helping you?" Aaron prompted.

"Thank you, Miss Sanders," Jacob said as he pulled out a tattered teddy bear and placed it on top of his blanket. "You're real pretty. I don't know what my Mama looked like because she died just as soon as I was born. But I hope she looked exactly like you."

Katie felt her heart melt. She reached down and took Jacob's small hand. "That's awfully sweet of you to say, Jacob. I'm sure your mother loved you very much, and that she's proud of you now."

"Thank you, Miss Sanders," Jacob said. He smiled shyly, picked up the hat box he had been carrying around since he had arrived, and went to play with the other boys.

"What a sweet boy!" Katie exclaimed.

Aaron smirked. "He is sweet, but he can be a real handful sometimes. You can never take your eyes off him, it seems. He is my best pupil, though. Despite his age, he's very advanced."

"I don't know how you do it," Katie remarked, watching the children settle into the church.

"Do what?" Aaron asked.

"I work at the school, and although I love it, my days are long and tiring. When I get home, the last thing I want to do is talk to children again. But it sounds like at your school in New York, you were not only the headmaster during the day, but you also lived there and supervised them at night. That sounds like so much work!" Katie explained.

Aaron nodded. "It was a lot of work, but I was honored to have the opportunity. You see—"

Just then, a ball sailed past Aaron's head from behind, knocking over a vase situated on a small table. Aaron lunged forward and barely managed to grasp it. He straightened himself, brushed off his shirt, and set the vase down.

"Wow, that was a good catch!" Katie cried. "Are you all right?"

The color had drained from Aaron's face. He glared at his students. "What is the rule for playing with a ball inside any building?"

Throughout the church, the other pupils fell silent.

"What is the rule?" Aaron repeated.

From the back corner, Jonah piped up. "No ball inside, sir."

"That's right, Jonah." The color returned to Aaron's face, and he took a few deep breaths. "Outside, all of you! And that ball is mine!"

Jonah retrieved the ball and handed it back to Aaron. The boys hurried to the door and exited the church in a single-file line.

Aaron composed himself. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to lose my temper. I just was concerned the boys would break that lovely vase that belongs to the church."

Katie nodded. "I understand. You care about the children, and you want to treat them with kindness, and believe the best in them, but you also have to discipline them and scold them to make sure they learn right from wrong."

Aaron nodded. "Precisely." He realized it was rare that he had met a woman he connected with so well before. He could tell that Katie was truly listening to everything he said. Not to mention how lovely she was. He wished he could simply lean over and — Suddenly, he felt self-conscious standing in front of Katie and thinking such scandalous thoughts. "Please excuse me." He needed to clear his head.

Outside, the boys had found another ball and were tossing it around to each other and chasing one another with sticks they'd found on the ground. Aaron sighed and shook his head. Working with youths meant there was no time to rest. They were always getting into some type of mischief.

Aaron scanned the crowd. All of the orphans were present and accounted for except one: Jacob. Aaron knew that wasn't a good sign. Whenever Jacob wandered off, he had a tendency to get into sticky situations and Aaron was not prepared to handle such misconduct. He looked at his wristwatch. Sarah Jane would serve dinner shortly, so he had to find Jacob as quickly as possible.

Callum, a boy of ten, raced past Aaron toward the church, squealing and laughing. Aaron hadn't seen him that happy in weeks. Maybe the open spaces and fresh air in Texas would be good for the boys. Aaron watched as Callum stopped suddenly and stood stock-still.

Aaron frowned. He walked over to the boy. "Are you all right, Callum?"

Callum put his finger to his lips and motioned for Aaron to be quiet. "Listen," he whispered.

Aaron turned his ear in the direction Callum had indicated. A cascade of perfect notes rang through the air, clear as a crystal. A woman with the loveliest voice Aaron had ever heard was singing a church hymn. Around him, the boys heard it, too, and they stopped their game to listen.

Aaron's feet began propelling him toward the church before he even realized what he was doing. He had to meet the woman who was singing. He wanted to listen to her forever.

The boys quietly followed Aaron into the church. At the front of the church, a beam of light from the window obscured the singer. Aaron stepped closer until the woman took form. It was Katie Sanders, and she had the voice of an angel.

Aaron and his charges crept closer and took seats in the front pews, reverently listening to the beautiful melodies.

Katie smiled as she realized she had an audience. She hadn't been trying to attract an audience, but she never minded performing. She loved to sing and wasn't self-conscious or shy about it.

As she sang, Katie felt something cold inside of her dress. She tried to continue, but stopped abruptly as something wriggled around underneath her clothes.

From the audience, Aaron watched in horror as Katie danced around the front of the church. She looked like she was in pain. What was wrong with her?

Suddenly, a greenish blur dropped from Katie's skirt onto the floor and began to hop! The boys jumped out of their seats to try to catch it. Katie shrieked and ran away. Pandemonium broke loose in the church.

Edna Petunia stumbled into the church, holding a frying pan. "What's all this commotion about?" She screamed as the frog hopped onto her foot and into the pews, then chased after it with the frying pan.

"No, please don't hurt Freddy!" Jacob pleaded, throwing himself onto his knees. "Everyone, please be careful! Don't step on my pet!"

Aaron winced. He had forgotten about the frog Jacob had found in New York days ago. He had assumed Jacob had left his pet in New York. How could he have been so foolish? Of course Jacob had found a way to smuggle a frog onto a days-long bus ride.

Aaron walked up to Katie and helped her steady herself. "Are you all right? I'm so deeply sorry about this."

Katie grinned. "I was startled more than anything. I'll be fine.

Sounds like you have a school mascot?"

Aaron shook his head vigorously. "Just a simple mistake. I should have never allowed Jacob to play with that frog. I'm embarrassed." He felt it was best not to explain the entire story to Katie of how the frog came to be in Nowhere.

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about. Jacob and the others are young boys. They're bound to get into a little mischief once in a while," Katie said as she watched Jacob carefully look for his pet.

Sarah Jane re-entered the church. "Attention!" Sarah Jane cried over the din. "It's time to eat!"

"Oh, no," Katie whispered as she turned to look at Sarah Jane.

At the same time Katie spoke, Aaron saw exactly what she was talking about. The frog was perched nonchalantly on Sarah Jane's head. The church fell into a hush once more.

"Mrs. Sarah Jane! Mrs. Sarah Jane!" Jacob ran forward, nearly tripping over his skinny legs.

"What's wrong, honey?" Sarah Jane asked sweetly.

"Don't move," Aaron called out in warning.

Sarah Jane looked confused.

Jacob picked up the hat box he'd poked holes in and held it out to Sarah Jane. "Would you, um, could you...?"

"What do you need, honey?" Sarah Jane was now baffled. Everyone was looking at her with an odd expression on her face. She couldn't tell if it was amusement, fear, or both, but she didn't like it. "What is going on?"

"*RIBBIT*," the frog called, its sound ringing throughout the church.

Sarah Jane realized she had a live animal on her head and screamed. The frog fell into the hat box and Jacob closed the lid triumphantly. Sarah danced around, still screaming. Micah came out to comfort her.

"What was that?" Sarah Jane asked, her voice shaking.

Aaron sighed as he stepped forward to take responsibility. Things in Nowhere were not off to a great start.

Chapter Three

Each day after her work at the school house was done, Katie stopped by the church to see how the orphans were doing. She knew what it was like to be new in town, and she wanted to make sure all the boys felt comfortable in their new temporary home. And it didn't hurt that she got to see Aaron Cavett.

Katie had thought that by seeing him so often, he would start to lose his strange pull over her. Instead, her feelings for him had only intensified. As soon as he walked into a room, she felt an instant need to be near him at all times.

Katie walked through the pews of the church until she found the blanket with the teddy bear on top. She pulled a book out of her bag and looked around for a sign of Jacob. She found him sitting in the corner, playing with Callum and Freddy. "I brought something for you." Katie held up the book and set it down next to the teddy bear.

"Thank you, Miss Sanders!" Jacob leapt up and raced toward her, throwing his arms around her knees and wrapping them in a big hug.

"You're welcome," Katie laughed. She had always enjoyed spending time with her nieces and nephews, but her connection to Jacob felt different. It was already a close and special bond even though they'd only known each other for a few days.

Jacob opened the book. It was a chapter book on frogs. "It's all about Freddy and his friends! Oh, thank you!" Jacob beamed.

"Maybe you can read it to me later," Katie suggested. Even though the book was more appropriate for an older child, Jacob was reading well ahead of others his age. She knew he'd be able to handle this book, and that he'd find it highly entertaining.

"Yes, ma'am," Jacob responded. He rushed back to Callum and picked up Freddy. "I can't wait to show you my new book, Freddy!"

Katie looked for Aaron next. He was certainly keeping himself busy. During the day, he gave the boys lessons. Katie and Miss Carroll had cleaned out the back room of the schoolhouse and found some old primers and books they didn't mind sharing. The schoolhouse was too small for all of its current students and the orphans combined, so Aaron continued to teach the boys.

Sure enough, she found him organizing a large stack of books in the corner. "Hello, Aaron."

Aaron barely looked up as she approached. "Hello."

Katie wished he would show a little interest and ask her how her day went. It was the least he could do. Then again, he was very busy. "How were your lessons today?"

Aaron sighed. "Fine. I really need a permanent space, though. We're very grateful to use the church, but the boys need a real school house."

Katie nodded. "I understand. I think if they were learning in a real institution, they would take it more seriously."

Aaron finally looked up and stared into Katie's eyes. "Exactly." Katie felt a buzz of electricity as their eyes met.

"Has there been any progress with that?" Katie asked. "Finding you a permanent space, I mean. Cletus hasn't said much about it at home."

Aaron shook his head. "Not that I'm aware of. There's been a lot of grumbling and consternation about the fact that there are fifteen rowdy boys in Nowhere who don't belong here. Sometimes, I think they'd like to send the lot of us back to New York."

"No!" Katie cried out before she could stop herself. "You can't go back to New York."

Aaron seemed amused. "Why is that?"

Katie's mind raced as she tried to think of reasonable excuses. "I think the boys will be happier in Nowhere than in New York. The big city could be dangerous for them. Here, they'll be able to do hard work and get ahead without all of the distractions of a big city."

Aaron nodded. "You may have a point there." He closed the book he had been examining and opened the next one. "Of course, regardless of where the boys end up, I'll be returning to New York at some point in the near future."

"What?" Katie felt a wave of sadness wash over her. How could Aaron leave?

"My work is in New York," Aaron said gently. "I'll miss the boys, of course, but—"

"The boys!" Katie exclaimed. "But they could be tempted down the wrong path without your guidance! Aren't you worried about what will happen to them?"

"I suppose it all comes down to where they'll receive their education. If it's a proper school, I trust they'll be fine, even without me," Aaron explained. He took his job as a teacher very seriously, but he wasn't so egotistical that he believed he was the only teacher who could serve his students well.

"What about little Jacob?" Katie continued.

Aaron looked puzzled. "What about him?"

“He absolutely adores you,” Katie said. “He’ll be devastated if you leave.” *Not to mention, I’d be devastated, too*, Katie thought. “Plus, I’ve seen the way you look after him. You really care for him. I suspect you’d miss him just as much as he’d miss you.”

Aaron frowned. “I care for Jacob just as I care for all my pupils.”

Katie didn’t press the issue further, but she knew she was right. For all of his rules and rigor, Aaron Cavett had a soft spot for little Jacob.

Callum ran up to Katie and Aaron and tugged on Katie’s skirt. “Miss Sanders! Will you sing for us again?”

Katie looked at Aaron. “I’m not sure. I don’t want to disturb your Headmaster.”

“Nonsense,” Aaron replied. “You won’t distract me. In fact, your singing will help me focus on my work. You have a beautiful voice, Katie. I hope you’ll use it.”

Katie’s heart soared at Aaron’s compliment. She nodded and made her way to the center of the church. A few of the boys gathered around her and she began to sing a few scales as a warm-up.

She taught the boys the notes she sang and within a few minutes, they had joined her.

Aaron sat back and rubbed his aching temples. Despite the fact that he had worked nonstop since arriving in Nowhere, he had accomplished very little. The boys had no permanent place to live or go to school. But at moments like these, watching beautiful Katie singing with the boys, he felt like he was exactly where he was meant to be.

Even Jacob looked positively angelic as he sang next to Katie, even though Aaron knew he was most likely planning something mischievous.

Aaron wanted to get back to work, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from Katie and her incredible voice. He had never heard anything like it before. He didn’t think she knew what a special gift she had been blessed with.

Katie taught the boys one of her favorite church hymns. They picked it up with ease, and soon they were even harmonizing with each other. Jacob had a natural command of pitch and tone, and Katie pushed him to project his voice. It rang out through the church.

Aaron sat in silence, amazed at what Katie had been able to teach Jacob in less than an hour. He had no idea the boy could sing like that. For all of Jacob’s talents, though, Katie’s voice was on another level.

Once the boys had tired of singing, they sat down on the floor to rest.

“Please, Miss Sanders, just one more?” Callum begged.

“Yes, Miss Sanders! Another!” Jacob chimed in.

The other boys also beseeched her to continue, and Katie finally acquiesced. "Fine. One more song. But this is the last one," she warned.

The boys erupted into cheers.

Katie closed her eyes and thought about her growing interest in Aaron. She wasn't brave enough to tell him how she felt about him in words, so why not in song? She could sing any song but would make sure the tone and inflection made it clear that she was in love.

Slowly, Katie began to sing. Even the older boys came in through the back of the church and reverently took seats in the pews, listening to Katie's melodies float through the air. Katie poured all of her passion and emotion into her song. She didn't look at Aaron once, but he was all she could think about. When she drew to a finish, the boys and Aaron burst into applause.

Katie blushed and took a mock bow. She walked over to Aaron.

"That was spectacular, Katie," Aaron said. He felt alive after listening to the way Katie sang. He knew he could listen to her for hours.

"Thank you," Katie said gratefully. She looked at the stack of paperwork and books in front of him. "Do you need any help?"

Aaron shook his head. "I don't want to trouble you with the mess I've created. One of my teachers used to tell me that I make things more complicated than they need to be."

Katie took a step closer. "I really don't mind. I would be happy to help."

Aaron stared at Katie's delicate mouth and imagined kissing her. His heart began pounding faster and faster. He worried it was so loud she would be able to hear it. But instead, she stood there, waiting for further instructions.

Aaron shook his head. He needed to pull himself together. "No, thank you, Miss Sanders. Have a good evening," Aaron told Katie with an air of finality.

Katie swallowed back a few tears of disappointment and nodded. "Good night."

Katie said goodbye to Jacob, Callum, and the other boys and then left the church. She sat outside the building and waited for Cletus to pick her up after he was done at work. No matter what she tried to think about, her thoughts kept returning to Aaron Cavett. She couldn't figure him out. At times, he was friendly and generous. At others, he was strict and emotion-less. Which one was the real Aaron? And did he feel about her the way she felt about him?

Chapter Four

Aaron woke up the following morning with a renewed sense of purpose. It was time to find the orphans homes. The sooner he made arrangements for each of them, the sooner they could begin their new lives and the sooner he could return to New York.

Although the people of Nowhere had been mostly sweet and charitable to Aaron, he could not imagine himself staying in such a small town for a long time. He looked forward to returning to his life in the city.

But somehow, some way, every time Aaron tried to do anything, he thought of Katie. He thought of her as he fell asleep and as he woke up, as he ate Sarah Jane's cooking for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and as he delivered lessons to his students.

He found himself wondering if other men were courting her, and if so, what she thought of them. Often his thoughts bordered on the inappropriate, and once, he had to splash cold water on his face to wake him up from his silly fantasies.

After all, Aaron reasoned, a beautiful, friendly, and talented girl like Katie would certainly have many suitors. Why would she be interested in a strict, rule-abiding bore like him? He didn't stand a chance.

Plus, he had to focus on finding the boys homes. The latest update from the town was that a few of the men in town would work to expand the schoolhouse to accommodate more students. Aaron's pupils would start to attend school with the other children.

However, there were no clear answers about where the boys would live. There were families in town who were willing to take them in, but that meant the boys would be split apart.

For some of the boys, like Jacob, the orphanage had been the only home they'd ever known. Aaron shuddered as he thought about Jacob being torn away from the only brothers he'd ever had.

Aaron wondered if Katie and her sisters had ever been separated. He decided to ask her about it the next time he saw her. Then, maybe he'd ask her if she was being courted by anyone in Nowhere. And then maybe he'd finally work up the nerve to dip her backward and kiss

her.

Aaron's pulse quickened when he thought about Katie this way. Every time he saw her, she brightened his day. He was curious whether or not she would ever consider going back to New York. He allowed his mind to wander, dreaming up situations where Aaron and Katie walked hand in hand through the park.

Aaron sighed as he realized he was thinking about her again. This had to stop. He needed to focus and forget all about Katie Sanders. He had just decided to go to the Barton's living quarters for breakfast when he heard a loud knock on the front door of the church.

Aaron walked quietly to the entrance, careful not to wake any of the children sleeping in the pews. He opened the door and his jaw dropped open in shock.

Standing at the front door was Katie Sanders. It was as if his mind had somehow made her appear. "What are you doing here?"

Katie held a basket in her hands. "I was thinking about you all and I baked you some blueberry muffins."

Aaron accepted the basket. "You didn't have to do that. Thank you, Katie."

"You're welcome." Katie blushed. "You should try one."

Aaron looked back at the sleeping children and motioned for Katie to move outside. The pair walked out into the dewy fall morning. Aaron took one of the muffins from the basket and popped it into his mouth. "Oh, my," Aaron breathed. "This is delicious. Thank you!"

Katie beamed with pride. "You're welcome. I'm glad you like it."

"Is there anything you can't do?" Aaron teased. "You sing, you bake, you're wonderful with kids..."

Katie looked down. "Oh, those are nothing. I just enjoy them."

"It's not nothing to me," Aaron said, drawing Katie closer.

Katie gasped as Aaron leaned in. She closed her eyes and waited for his lips to meet hers.

Suddenly, Katie heard a loud croaking noise.

Aaron groaned. "Freddy!" He picked up a frog from the steps to the church and shook his head. "I'm so sorry about this. I need to find Freddy's hat box."

Katie felt impatient, but she couldn't help but laugh at the situation. "I'll help you look for it."

Aaron led her into the church, and together they walked softly and checked row by row for the missing hat box.

"Are you sure it's in the church? Maybe Jacob hid it outside," Katie suggested.

"That's a good idea," Aaron remarked. "Jacob likes to go outside." He frowned. "In fact, sometimes he goes outside when he really should be studying!"

Katie smiled. She wasn't surprised to hear that. Although she knew Jacob sometimes displayed less than ideal behavior, he had made a strong impression on her. She knew his heart was in the right place.

Outside, Katie and Aaron looked near the church entrance, under rocks, and behind trees, but they could not find the missing hat box. Aaron carried the frog in a handkerchief, holding it a few feet away from his body as much as possible.

"I should just let this creature free," Aaron grumbled.

Katie knew he didn't mean it. Jacob had grown awfully fond of Freddy the Frog, and she could tell that Aaron was awfully fond of Jacob. Just then, she noticed a small pile of stones stacked in a pile near some logs. "Look, over there!"

Aaron followed Katie to the stones and they both began to dig through the pile. Sure enough, Jacob's hatbox was there. Aaron slid open the box and tipped the handkerchief inside, then quickly snapped the lid shut. He wiped his brow and panted. "I'm glad that's taken care of."

Katie laughed. "Me, too." She wanted to ask Aaron if they could pick up where they had left off before Freddy had interrupted them, but she wasn't sure what to say without seeming too forward.

Aaron thought about the piles of work ahead of him. He kept a detailed file on each boy so that in the event of an adoption, the boy's new family would know everything there was to know about his history and education. Each day, Aaron added various notes to his files and prepared for the following day's lesson. Later that day, he also planned to meet with several Nowhere families to see if they would be interested in taking some of the boys.

"I should get back to work now. Thank you for stopping by and bringing your delicious muffins," Aaron said politely.

Katie felt her heart sink. Aaron spoke to her as if she were nothing more than a baker. He didn't have feelings for her. She thought he had come close to kissing her earlier, but now she realized that it was all in her imagination. "You're welcome."

"Do you have a way home?" Aaron inquired.

Katie shrugged. "I'll just walk."

"Walk? You mean your parents didn't drive you over?" Aaron couldn't believe that a young woman of Katie's means would walk if she didn't have to.

"It was nothing," Katie waved her hand.

Aaron shook his head. "Nonsense. I'll walk you."

A shiver of anticipation tingled up Katie's spine. "Thank you."

Aaron found Jenkins inside the church, reading a book. "Jenkins, you're in charge until I get back. I won't be long."

Jenkins nodded. "Yes, sir."

Katie smiled at Aaron's consideration. She admired how he was so thoughtful, always taking time to determine how his actions might impact his pupils.

"I'm afraid you'll have to guide me," Aaron admitted. "Sense of direction isn't my strong suit."

"That's not a problem," Katie assured. "I've lived here so many years I know these roads like I know my own sisters!"

They walked in silence for a while, admiring the late morning sun.

When they started talking again, they both spoke at once.

"It's a beautiful day—" Katie began.

"I'm worried about—" Aaron said.

They both laughed nervously.

"You first," Aaron offered.

Katie drew in a breath. "It's nothing. I was just saying what a nice day it is. This close to Christmas, it's usually a bit colder."

Aaron nodded. "In New York it would be snowing by this time of year."

"I love the weather here, but sometimes I do miss the snow," Katie admitted.

"There's nothing like it," Aaron agreed. "Especially the first snowfall of the year."

"Yes. It's almost magical," Katie smiled. "But Nowhere has its perks, too!"

"Such as?" Aaron prodded.

Katie took a deep breath. "I love how spread out everything is here. I feel like I can really breathe. I can climb trees here and get dirty without anyone scolding me. But my absolute favorite is the starlight. In the city, I could barely ever see the stars."

Aaron stopped walking and stared at Katie.

Katie blushed. She wasn't normally shy, but she felt self-conscious when speaking to Aaron. She wanted him to think highly of her. "What is it?"

"When you say things like that, you make me want to kiss you," Aaron admitted. As he heard the words coming out of his mouth, he tried to take them back, but it was useless. He had said it out loud. He was disappointed at how weak his willpower was.

Katie gasped. "It does?"

Aaron stepped closer and put a hand on the small of Katie's back.

Katie's heartbeat quickened in her chest. Aaron leaned closer to her, and Katie shut her eyes. Suddenly, Aaron was kissing her passionately. He moved his hands to encircle her waist, and Katie felt a rushing sensation in her stomach. She broke away from Aaron for a moment to suck in a breath of air, then pushed her lips back against his.

Aaron pushed his body into hers, desperate for some control. He had never had a problem before with keeping his urges intact, but Katie inspired a wild streak in him. His mind raced with inappropriate thoughts about the young woman standing before him, and he wasn't able to remove his hands from her body.

Katie felt as if she were spinning through the air. Aaron made her feel like all of her wishes and desires would come true. She didn't want to stop kissing him, but she had to take breaks to breathe! She laughed at the thought.

Aaron stepped back. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. Are you all right?"

Aaron's perplexed expression made Katie giggle even harder. She tried to tell him she was fine, but she doubled over in laughter.

Aaron bent down so he could see her face. "Are you ill?"

Katie shook her head, feeling her cheeks turn an even brighter shade of red. She continued to laugh.

Aaron lost his balance and fell over, and suddenly, they were both on the ground, laughing hysterically.

After a long while, Katie and Aaron finally quieted.

Aaron spoke first. "I can't remember the last time I actually laughed."

"You don't often laugh?" Katie asked, turning her head to look at him. They both were on the ground, staring up at the sky. Katie estimated that they still had a good twenty minutes before they would arrive at the Sanders home.

Aaron shook his head. "Usually I'm too busy worrying about the boys to have time for luxuries like laughter."

"That's sad," Katie declared, grabbing Aaron's hand. "I hope you will start to laugh more often."

Aaron smiled. "Thanks to you, I already have."

Katie felt warmth rush to her cheeks once again.

Suddenly, Aaron's expression grew serious. "I should get you home to your parents. They'll worry about you. Plus, I need to get back to work."

Katie tried to keep a smile on her face, but the corners of her mouth slumped. She wanted to stay with Aaron and enjoy the beautiful winter day. "Do you have to work today? I didn't think you held class on weekends."

Aaron nodded. "I work every day of the week. Many of the boys came to the orphanage behind where they needed to be in their schoolwork. I'm doing everything I can with the time I'm given."

"You're so dedicated to your work." Katie was impressed by Aaron's commitment to the boys. She wished she had something in her life that she cared so much about. She could think of one thing,

and he was standing right in front of her.

Aaron continued talking as they began to walk again. "I don't teach formal classes on weekends, but I often tutor the boys individually on subjects in which they need extra help. Today, though, my job is different." He stared off into the distance, his face set solemnly.

"What's that?" Katie asked.

"I need to find homes for the boys," Aaron explained.

"Have you made any progress?" Katie looked down at the ground. She was torn. She hoped Aaron would find a loving home for the boys, like the one Edna Petunia and Cletus had provided for Katie and her sisters. At the same time, she hoped that it would take a little longer. She didn't want Aaron to leave Nowhere.

Aaron sighed. "It's not as easy as anticipated. They all need homes, but most families seem to have room for only one child, not fifteen all at once."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I guess my sisters and I were lucky that we found a home when we did, and one that could accommodate all of us." Katie looked over at Aaron. He seemed lost in thought.

"I agree. I just don't know what to do. I don't suppose your parents want to take in another set of orphans, do they?" Aaron said. He was joking, but Katie seemed to take his question seriously, pausing before she answered.

"I know Edna Petunia would adopt an orphan every day of the week if she could, but I have a feeling that their adopting days are over. They love to spoil their grandchildren, though," Katie said gently.

"That's what I thought. Cletus has been very helpful to me, though. He's arranged meetings with different men and women from Nowhere and Bagley who may be interested in adoption." Aaron put his hands in his pockets. "But no paperwork has been signed yet. I suppose I'm waiting for someone to say that they'll take the whole lot, but I don't think that's going to happen."

Katie felt a surge of joy pulse through her body. "If you feel that's really what's right for the boys, maybe you should stay in Nowhere a little while longer."

Aaron frowned. "I'm afraid I'll have to. I hope to return to New York by Christmas."

Katie was upset at how disappointed Aaron looked. "Do you hate it here in Nowhere? Why are you so anxious to leave?"

Aaron realized what Katie was asking. "Oh, Katie. I hope I haven't misled you in any way. You're a wonderful person, and I'm so grateful for all of your help with the boys. But my life is in New York. My career is there, and I have never wanted to live anywhere else. I'm

embarrassed at my behavior. I hope you don't think I've been dishonest."

Katie shook her head slowly, her heart pounding. She felt sad, but she wasn't cross with Aaron. She understood his position. "No, you haven't been dishonest at all. I suppose I was just hoping...that you might stick around a bit."

As they walked, the sun cast beams of light on Katie's face, highlighting her delicate nose and long eyelashes. Aaron wondered if he had enough time for a detour.

"Aaron?" Katie asked as she noticed Aaron had stopped walking. They were just outside the Sanders home, but she didn't want to say goodbye.

Aaron snapped back to attention and grimaced. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me. I hope you have a wonderful day."

"You, too, Aaron." Katie smiled politely, but inside, she was glowing with happiness. No matter how much Aaron said otherwise, she knew that he liked her. Katie said a silent prayer that Aaron would stay in Nowhere a little while longer. She knew that fate had brought them together, and with a little more time, she could ensure that they would never have to part again.

Chapter Five

“I want a spinning top for Christmas!” Susie Bennett cried.

“I want a rocking horse!” Will Reeves shouted.

“I’ve already got my Christmas wish!” Edna Petunia winked at her children and grandchildren.

Dorothy Reeves moved her chair a little closer to the table, rocking her baby boy back and forth. Dorothy, Hope, and their families had come over for dinner at the Sanders home. Katie loved the opportunity to see her nieces and nephews. She was able to see them at church most Sundays, but it could be overwhelming. Her sisters had given birth to or adopted more children than anyone could keep track of. It was nice to see them in a smaller group setting, like dinner at the family home.

Dorothy smiled at Edna Petunia. “Let me guess. A house full of bastards and grandbastards?”

No one completely understood why, but Edna Petunia was partial to calling her daughters bastards. None of the girls felt compelled to correct her, though, mostly feeling that Edna Petunia had earned the right to a few eccentricities in her maturity.

Edna Petunia threw her head back and laughed. “No. But it’s not polite to share at the dinner table.” She smiled at her husband, Cletus.

The patriarch of the family shook his head, joining her in laughter with a loud guffaw. “Edna Petunia, my bride, you’ve continued to surprise me since the day I met you.”

“And you wouldn’t have it any other way,” Edna Petunia commented. Cletus leaned over for a kiss, and Katie smiled to herself. She hoped that one day, she’d have a love like theirs—even if they were sometimes obnoxiously affectionate, especially in public.

Dorothy made eye contact with Hope and smiled. Edna Petunia had been an unconventional adoptive mother, but Dorothy wouldn’t have traded her for anyone in the world.

Hope grinned back. She placed her hand on her husband’s shoulder. She felt so lucky to have even met Stephen in the first place. She owed it all to Edna Petunia. Before Edna Petunia had lived in Texas, she had worked in Seattle for a female doctor, Iris Harvey.

They traveled to Texas together and were still close friends even though they didn't work together. Hope had met Dr. Iris's nephew, Stephen Bennett, when he'd arrived in Nowhere to conclude his medical education. Now, Stephen and his aunt both ran the medical practice in Nowhere together, and he and Hope had three beautiful children.

Katie watched her nieces and nephews excitedly discuss their plans for the Christmas holiday, and a wave of sadness washed over her. She looked down at her food, no longer hungry.

"Katie, what's wrong? Are you ill?" Dorothy hated to see Katie without a bright smile on her face. As the youngest daughter, Katie was almost always the cheeriest person in the room, often singing or humming. It was out of character to see her so forlorn.

Katie looked up at Dorothy, tears welling in her eyes. "I was just talking to Aaron Cavett. He told me about how the orphans don't have homes yet. They'll probably be split up. I was just thinking, if they don't find homes before Christmas, how will they get Christmas gifts?"

Katie knew that Christmas was about much more than gifts, but she also thought that exchanging presents was a wonderful thing to do. But who would buy presents for the orphans? They had no family to speak of, and time was running out. Christmas was less than three weeks away.

Edna Petunia frowned. "That's so sad. You know I'd adopt them if I could. But if we added fifteen boys to this household, in addition to the fifteen girls along with the husbands, the children, the pets...well, I don't think they'd all fit. And what kind of family would it be if you can't all fit under the same roof?"

No one argued with Edna Petunia. They enjoyed the fact that although their family was large, they could still get together every once in a while by squeezing into a larger home like the one the Sanders lived in.

Katie sighed. "I wish I were older and had a husband. I'd adopt all the orphans and give them the best Christmas they've ever seen." She rested her chin on her hands. She knew exactly who she wanted her husband to be. Now, she just had to convince him not to leave the state.

"You'll make a wonderful mother one day, Katie," Dorothy said kindly. "Right now, you are a bit young."

"You were young when you had your first child," Katie shot back, sharper than she intended.

Dorothy looked stung. "That's true," she said uncertainly.

"I'm sorry," Katie apologized. "I didn't mean to lose my temper. I'm just feeling so emotional about these orphans. If only there were a way to..." Katie bit her lip, concentrating all her energy on thoughts

about the orphans. "That's it!" Katie stood up abruptly and ran out of the room. Her footsteps echoed on the stairs.

Edna Petunia took a bite of pot roast. "Hmph. What has gotten into that bastard?"

The rest of the family continued to eat their dinner. The children talked about what they would eat for Christmas dinner and tried to contain their excitement about a gift they were working on for someone in the family.

"I can't tell you who it's for. It's a secret!" Susie explained.

Hope smiled. "I'm glad you are thinking about giving gifts, not only receiving them! It's more important to give than receive."

Susie grinned. "I know, Mama."

The floorboards from the stairs groaned and creaked and soon Katie re-emerged in the kitchen holding a sheet of paper, panting for air. "I figured out how we can make this Christmas a special one for the orphans!"

"Oh? What's the idea?" Carter, Dorothy's husband, asked. He was an attorney in Nowhere and wanted to do his part to help out.

Katie held up the sheet of paper. "If each couple—including Edna Petunia and Cletus—buys one present for one orphan, each orphan will get a present! Do you think everyone in the family would agree to that?"

"I think they would enjoy that," Hope said. "I personally would be honored to help make Christmas special for one of the boys. I'm sure they're feeling overwhelmed by all the change in their lives right now. I remember what it was like when we came to Nowhere."

"You're right," Dorothy agreed. "Count me in, Katie."

"Thank you so much!" Katie rushed up to where her sisters were sitting and gave them each a hug.

"Wait a minute," Hope said. "What about you, Katie? Don't you want to buy a gift?"

Katie smiled mischievously. "Yes. I'm going to buy a gift, too. For Aaron."

Dorothy clapped her hands. "Do you have a crush on the headmaster?"

"Will I ever be able to eat my dinner in peace and quiet?" Cletus moaned.

"Hush, dear, I want to hear the answer!" Edna Petunia scolded.

Katie felt her face turning red. "I just think he's a very nice man!"

"Good, he's too old for you, anyway," Cletus said, spearing his pot roast with his fork and waving it in the air to prove his point.

Katie's face fell. "What? He can't be more than a few years older than me!" Katie protested.

Cletus looked at Edna Petunia, Dorothy, and Hope, and they all

burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Stephen asked.

“I don’t understand,” Carter remarked.

“We’re only teasing Katie because it sounds like she’s got a crush on the headmaster,” Hope explained. “I’m sorry, Katie. I hope you know it’s all in good fun.”

Katie shrugged. “All I know is that we need to make sure this is the best Christmas Nowhere has ever seen. Then I’ll be happy.”

Cletus smiled at his youngest daughter. “We can certainly do our best to see to that.”

Katie beamed. For all their teasing, the Sanders family was the best family she had ever known. She was proud to be a part of it.

As Katie helped Edna Petunia clear the dishes, she thought of gift ideas for Aaron. She thought she might ask Penny to knit her a scarf, but then she realized it wouldn’t get much use in Nowhere. Since Aaron was from New York, he likely wouldn’t find the Texas winters cold at all. She tried to think of any hobbies Aaron had mentioned, but she couldn’t think of a single one.

For a man so driven by his work, what could she possibly get him that he would find useful? She thought about it as she washed and dried the dishes to no avail. She wasn’t upset—merely determined. She would come up with the perfect Christmas gift for Aaron. One that would convince him to stay in Nowhere with her forever.

“CAVETT? Did you hear what I said?” Gerald Sibley asked, a concerned look on his face.

Aaron blinked his eyes rapidly. “Excuse me, sir. What were you saying?” Aaron had been in a peculiar mood ever since his encounter with Katie early that morning. He couldn’t believe he had lost control of his emotions like that. He expected more from himself than that. It wasn’t fair to Katie, and it wasn’t fair to the boys. They were his charges, orphanage or not. He wasn’t about to abandon them now.

Gerald continued, perturbed. “I was saying, we thought we wanted another child now that our Mary is married and living with her husband. Even took one of those Witherspoon twins for a spell. Then that Sanders girl—well, now she’s a Witherspoon—came here fussing about how twins ought to be together, and carrying on and on. So what I’m trying to tell you is, we just found out our Mary is expecting. A grandchild will be more than enough for us. You find another family to take the boys. We’re doing well, but not well enough to allow fifteen boys to stay with us.”

Aaron nodded slowly, unsure of what Gerald was talking about

and how it related to the Sanders family. Gerald was the third person who'd said no to him that day alone. He tried not to let panic creep into his voice. "I understand, Gerald. Thank you for your time."

Gerald stood up and walked Aaron to the door. "I wish I could have told you something better, son. But that's the honest truth."

"Of course," Aaron mumbled. He walked toward his horse. It was proving to be a long and stressful day. His next appointment seemed to be across town.

As Aaron rode through Nowhere, he thought about what Katie had said about the open land. She was right, he conceded, that it did permit one a certain sense of freedom. Sometimes in the city, he felt trapped, like there was no place to go. He hadn't had that feeling since arriving in Nowhere. The hills surrounding the small town made him feel like it was a secluded little place. One his boys would be better for spending the rest of their childhoods in.

Aaron wondered how his next appointment would go. He hoped that the couple, Louis and Lois Schramm, would be willing to take in at least two orphans. Since his plan of finding one family for all fifteen boys wasn't coming to fruition, he had decided to focus on three or four families who could accommodate the boys.

Aaron pulled up to the Schramm's home, dismounted, and tied his horse to a post. He noted with dismay that the house seemed quite small from the outside. He couldn't let that deter his efforts, though. He knocked on the door.

A warm woman with gray hair and a purple sweater opened the door. "Ah, Headmaster Cavett. Welcome. May I fix you some tea?"

Aaron shook his head. He had business to attend to. "Lois Schramm, I presume?"

The woman nodded. "That's me. Lou!" Lois called.

Louis Schramm, a jovial man of roughly the same age, barreled into the room and pumped Aaron's hand enthusiastically. "Glad to have you in our town, Headmaster. Can never have too many teachers, that's what I always say. Isn't that what I always say, Lo?"

Lois bobbed her head up and down. For a moment, Aaron was worried she might hurt herself. But Lois merely smiled. "Yes, you always do, Lou!"

Aaron's head spun from their rapid dialogue. He tried to focus on the matter at hand. "Mr. and Mrs. Schramm, I'm here to speak to you about the fine young men from the Robert Ballinger Institution for Boys."

Louis gestured to a sofa and Aaron took a seat. Louis sank into a comfortable-looking armchair, and Lois settled into a rocking chair right next to him.

"Each of the boys has a different skill set, and I believe every single

one of them has the potential to be very successful in whatever he pursues,” Aaron continued. “Whether he chooses agriculture, business, law, or something else, these young men are going to do great things. As fine citizens of Nowhere, I ask you if you would do the town the kind favor of taking in a few of these fine, upstanding young men. You would be the parents they deserve.” Aaron finished his speech and panted for air.

In the next room, the tea kettle squealed. “Oh, my!” Lois exclaimed and hopped out of the rocking chair to bring out the tea.

Louis frowned, ignoring his wife. “How many young men are we speaking of?”

Aaron looked at Louis directly in the eyes. “Five would be preferable, sir.”

Louis let out a loud belly laugh. “Lo! Get in here!”

Lois came in, carrying two teacups clattering on a serving tray. She set one down on the coffee table in front of Louis. “Are you sure you don’t want a cup, Mr. Cavett?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Schramm.” Aaron stared at the floor. Louis Schramm was about to tell him exactly what he thought about Aaron’s plan, and Aaron was afraid he was not going to like it.

Louis grabbed his wife’s hand. “Lo, Mr. Cavett would like us to adopt five boys! Can you imagine?” He laughed as he gestured around the small one-story home. “Where would we put them?”

Aaron felt like it was a lost cause, but he pushed forward nonetheless. “I certainly understand your hesitation, sir. But if there’s any way you could take in some of the boys...it would mean that they wouldn’t get split up. These boys know each other, but they don’t know a single other soul in Nowhere. Please, Mr. Schramm. They need someone to help them.”

Louis stopped laughing. His face grew serious. “I understand you’re in a difficult position. I hope you find a home for all of the boys, I truly do. But we just don’t have the space to take in five children! Or four, or three, or really any amount. Lo and I have been on our own for quite some time, and we like it that way.”

Lois nodded. “We’d be happy to help if you need supplies donated, like notebooks or pencils for the children. But I don’t think we would be a good fit to adopt any of the boys. We’re sorry we can’t help more.”

Aaron nodded. All through town, it was the same story. People understood what he was working toward and why he was doing it, but they weren’t able to help personally. He was beginning to think there was no hope at all for his fifteen charges, and that made him feel like a failure.

He refused to give up, though. There had to be a way, and he was

going to find it.

Chapter Six

Katie gazed at the walls of the church, admiring the red ribbons she had hung. She imagined the church filled with townspeople for the Christmas service. After church, she planned to present Aaron and the boys with their Christmas gifts. She couldn't wait to see the look on Aaron's face when he opened her gift.

It had taken her a few weeks to think of it, but now she was confident he would love it. Aaron knew that there was some type of gathering that would be held at the church after the service, but he had no idea about Katie's plan to give each orphan his own gift. He had mostly avoided Katie, but she stopped by the church daily to see how the boys were doing.

Today, Katie was helping Sarah Jane decorate for the season. Sarah Jane had a creative streak and loved to keep the church looking its best for all the holidays and special occasions throughout the year.

Sarah Jane looked up from her spot on the ground. She held the ladder Katie was standing on. "A little higher, I think."

Katie nodded. She lifted the ribbon a few inches and reattached it to the wall. "How about this?"

Sarah Jane took a close look. "Yes. I think that's good."

Katie climbed down the ladder, and she and Sarah Jane picked it up and moved it a few yards away. Katie took another ribbon from Sarah Jane's decoration basket and returned to the top of the ladder.

As she reached up to pin it on the wall, she heard a few shouts below. The ladder swayed, and Katie put her arms out, trying to balance. She closed her eyes as she tumbled toward the ground, knowing it would be painful.

To her surprise, she landed in what felt like a bed of pillows. Strong arms wrapped around her. She blinked her eyes open.

Aaron Cavett set her down delicately on the floor. His eyes were filled with concern. "Are you all right?"

Katie nodded. She wished she could climb back into Aaron's arms. She had felt so comfortable there! "What just happened?"

Sarah Jane rushed up to Katie. "I'm so, so sorry I let you fall! Are you sure you're okay?"

Katie ignored Sarah Jane's question and watched Aaron, who turned to a group of boys who had gathered nearby.

"You are all punished, effective immediately!" Aaron's eyes flashed in anger. "Someone could have been seriously hurt! You're lucky that Katie is all right. What have I said about your behavior in this church?"

The boys were solemn. Katie noticed Jacob fidgeting and avoiding Aaron's hard stare.

Finally, Jacob stepped forward. "We're very sorry, Miss Sanders, Mrs. Barton, and Headmaster Cavett. It won't happen again." Katie saw true remorse on the boy's face, and knew he meant it.

Aaron wasn't satisfied. "Everyone is to sit down in the front pew immediately! You will stay there and think about your actions until I dismiss you."

The boys froze for a moment, but then began to shuffle to the front of the church. They exchanged hushed whispers as they sat down in the seats of the first pew.

"And you will be *silent* while you do so!" Aaron thundered.

Katie had never seen him so riled up. "I'm fine, Aaron," she said gently, putting a hand on his arm.

Aaron took a deep breath. "I'm glad you're fine, but there could have been real trouble here. Those boys need to learn to follow appropriate conduct in the church."

"Thank you for catching me. What happened, exactly?" Katie still wasn't sure what had happened and why Aaron seemed to blame the boys.

Sarah Jane chimed in. "I was holding the ladder, watching you hang the ribbon, and then I was on the ground. The boys ran into me and I fell over. The momentum made the ladder sway, and then you fell. I feel so awful for letting go."

"It's not your fault, Sarah Jane!" Katie said. "It was just an accident. I understand what you mean, though, Aaron, about teaching the boys how to act in church. I wouldn't want anyone to get hurt."

Aaron nodded slowly. Being around Katie seemed to have a calming effect on him, even when he was steaming mad.

"We have a few more decorations to hang. Would you like to help us? It might help take your mind off work. You seem like you need a break," Katie suggested.

Aaron shook his head. "Paperwork. I'd better get back to work."

Katie sighed. "All right. Sarah Jane and I should do the same."

Aaron disappeared quietly into the corner of the church where he had set up his office.

Sarah Jane watched as Aaron walked away. "Katie, is there something between you two?"

Katie looked down. "No. Not really."

Sarah Jane grabbed Katie's wrist. "Oh, my goodness! There is something!"

Katie shook her head. "No. There may have been something, but Aaron's convinced he's moving back to New York. And I'm staying here in Nowhere. It would never work out."

"You don't know that for sure," Sarah Jane soothed. "I can tell both of you have strong feelings for one another."

"I don't know." Katie waited as Sarah Jane steadied the ladder, then climbed up it again. "We'll see."

After all the decorations were hung, Sarah Jane went back to her living quarters to check on her children and prepare for dinner.

Katie wandered over to Aaron's office area. "How's it going?"

Aaron startled. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't see you coming! There's just so much to do. There are too many boys...too many families..."

Katie hated seeing Aaron so upset. He seemed about ready to pull out his hair. "Would you like to take a walk?"

"I don't have time for a walk," Aaron declared.

"It will help you focus more later. I promise. Please?" Katie held her breath, hoping he would respond positively.

After a short pause, Aaron stood up. "You're probably right. Just a quick walk, though."

Katie beamed. Before they left, Aaron walked up to the first pew and made sure the boys were sitting in a straight line and not speaking. Then they walked out of the front entrance to the church.

It was another beautiful winter day in Nowhere, with a slight chill running through the air. Katie shivered.

Aaron swung his suit jacket off and offered it to Katie. "Would you like to wear this?"

"Oh, I wouldn't want to take your clothes. Then you'll be cold!" Katie protested.

"I insist." Aaron helped wrap the jacket around Katie's shoulders, and she slipped her arms into the sleeves. She loved feeling so close to Aaron.

"How have you been?" Katie asked cautiously. Although she visited the church daily, she and Aaron hadn't been alone since the day they'd shared a kiss on the walk back to the Sanders house.

"Stressed," Aaron admitted truthfully. "It's all but settled. Each of the boys will be going to a separate home at best. There may be some boys who need to keep living at the church for some time."

"You mean there aren't enough families who will adopt a boy?" Katie asked. "Have you talked to my sister Penny and her husband, Tom?" In addition to being a talented seamstress, Penny and her husband lived in a large, beautiful home in Bagley complete with

several cabins. They often took in boys who needed a home. The boys lived in cabins on the property. They worked on the farm in exchange for a place to stay.

Aaron nodded. "Tom McClain? Their cabins are full right now. Said they might have one spot, but that was it."

Katie opened her mouth. What Aaron said had given her an idea. It was unexpected, but it just might work. She didn't want to tell Aaron until she was sure, though, so she kept quiet.

"You know, if I'm hard on them, it's only because I see so much of myself in them," Aaron explained as they continued walking through the fields by the church.

"And why is that?" Katie asked.

"I grew up as an orphan, too," Aaron told her.

Katie nodded. That explained why Aaron was so dedicated to his job, as well as why she felt so comfortable around him. They had both experienced many of the same things in life.

"I never was adopted, but I had a teacher who believed in me. Robert Ballinger," Aaron went on.

"That's the name of the school you worked at!" Katie noticed.

"That's right." Aaron put his hands in his pockets. "He founded the school. A few years ago, he passed away, and his son runs the company now. They have several schools in New York now. But the son—Lazarus—is not nearly as dedicated as his father, unfortunately."

"That's too bad. I bet you would be good in his position. Running a lot of schools," Katie remarked.

"I don't know about that," Aaron replied. "I'm having a hard time finding placements for all of my boys. I guess I just always wanted for them what you and your sisters had—a loving home where they could stay forever. So many of these children have grown up being passed around different homes and schools for years at a time. I want to find a place they can grow to call home. Do you know what I mean?"

Katie smiled and nodded. "I know exactly what you mean. Even though the orphanage in New York is where I met all my sisters, and we had a wonderful matron, things really changed for me when we moved here and had a permanent home with Edna Petunia and Cletus. That's when I knew I really felt I belonged."

Aaron stopped walking. "Katie, I need to tell you something."

Katie's heart raced. Was Aaron going to admit he had feelings for her and wanted to stay? She smiled at him encouragingly.

Aaron hesitated. He didn't know how to say what he had to say without hurting Katie. Upsetting her was the last thing he wanted to do. He bit his lip. "Katie, I've booked a train ticket. I'll leave from Austin to go back to New York City the day after Christmas."

Katie felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her. Her

expression clouded, full of confusion. "You're leaving? But I thought you were staying until the boys had homes."

"My boss sent me a letter. He needs me back in New York to open another school," Aaron explained. "If I don't return, he'll dismiss me."

Katie's eyes filled with tears. "I thought...I thought you'd want to stay."

Aaron sighed. "I want to stay and find homes for the boys, of course, but then I'll lose my job. And if I'm not employed, what kind of example will I be?"

Katie hated that Aaron's employer seemed not to understand the position. And there was something else that was bothering her, too. "What about me?" As soon as she heard herself say the words, she regretted them. He had made no promises to her, and she had no right to question his intentions.

"Oh, Katie." Aaron still didn't understand the hold Katie had over him. No matter how many times he had sworn to himself that he had to remain logical and unemotional about the situation, he couldn't stop thinking about Katie's lovely face and sweet gestures. She truly was the perfect woman for him, and he was a fool to leave her. Hurting her made him feel horrible about himself. He took her hands in his, but Katie pulled away.

"No. If you're not staying, we can't be anything more than friends. I can't get too attached to this, because you'll be gone in a week's time," Katie explained.

Aaron nodded gravely. "I understand. You're right." He began walking again, but Katie didn't budge.

"I think I'd like to be on my own right now," Katie said.

"Of course." Aaron started to walk back to the church.

"Wait—your coat." Katie started to shrug it off her shoulders, but Aaron shook his head.

"No, you keep it. Just leave it on one of the pews when you come back in."

Katie watched as Aaron returned to the church building. She had never felt so sad or alone.

Chapter Seven

Katie continued to stop at the church daily, but she avoided Aaron at all costs. She went to find Sarah Jane or Micah or spoke to the boys directly. All of the boys were excited for the Christmas service because Katie had been teaching them to sing.

“Please, don’t go, Miss Sanders!” Jacob pleaded.

Katie smile ruefully. She adored the child, and he knew it. “Fine, Jacob. We’ll do one more. But then I’m going straight home.”

Katie looked at all the boys, counted to three, and pointed at them. They began to sing.

When they had finished, Katie clapped her hands. “That was wonderful!”

Jacob rushed up to Katie and tugged on her skirt. “Miss Sanders, could we sing that song at the Christmas service?”

“I don’t see why not. I’ll add it to my notes,” Katie told him, ruffling his hair.

Jacob smiled angelically. “It’s Headmaster Cavett’s favorite!”

Katie’s expression darkened as she thought about Aaron. Every time she remembered he was leaving stabbed at her heart. She tried to pull herself together for Jacob. “Then I’ll make sure we do it. Thank you, Jacob. That’s awfully thoughtful of you.”

Jacob opened his mouth to say something else, but quickly shut it.

Katie noticed his lower lip trembling. “What’s the matter, Jacob?”

“Jonah said he overheard Headmaster Cavett talking to Pastor Barton about New York. Jonah said he’s leaving in a few days and not coming back. Is that true?” Jacob looked down at the floor, blinking his eyes rapidly.

Katie knelt down and looked Jacob in the eye. “Has he talked to you about it?”

Jacob shook his head. “He keeps telling us to worry about our schoolwork and not worry about him. But I’m going to miss him, Miss Sanders. I’m going to miss him very badly.”

Katie saw a wet tear rolling down Jacob’s cheek and wanted to cry herself. “Well, Mr. Cavett has a job to get back to in New York. But I’m sure he would want to talk to you about this himself. Why don’t

we go talk to him about it now?"

Jacob shook his head. "No, miss."

"Why not?" Katie was confused.

"Because I don't want it to be true!" With that, Jacob spun around and rushed out the doors to the church. A few boys raced after him, which caught Aaron's attention.

"No running in the church!" Aaron yelled. He looked up, and his eyes met Katie's.

Katie turned away and hurried after Jacob. The poor dear!

She found him outside, listlessly watching Freddy inside the hatbox. "Jacob? Would you like to talk?"

Jacob folded his arms. "No!"

Katie bent down and took a seat next to him on the ground. "Okay. I'll sit with you for a little while."

They sat together in silence until Freddy let out a loud *ribbit*. Katie burst out laughing and Jacob soon joined her.

"Why don't we go back inside?" Katie suggested. "It's going to get cold out here."

Jacob sighed. "Miss Sanders?"

"Yes?" Katie looked the boy in the eyes.

"Do you think Headmaster Cavett would take me with him if I asked nicely and promised to behave?" Jacob asked, a solemn expression on his face.

Katie's heart swelled. The poor boy! "Oh, Jacob. I'm sure that seems like it would be lovely, but Mr. Cavett wouldn't be allowed to do that. He's working hard to find you a nice family who will adopt you forever."

Jacob pouted. "I don't want a new family! I want Headmaster Cavett."

"He's a very good teacher," Katie agreed. "But he doesn't have a wife or any other children. Wouldn't you get lonely?"

Jacob yawned. "Maybe."

"You know," Katie continued. "When I came to Nowhere, we didn't have a place to stay, either. A family took us in. Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders—you might have seen them in church. They opened their home to all of us girls from an orphanage in New York—fifteen girls in all. And you know what?"

Jacob leaned in closer, absorbed in Katie's story. "What?"

"It's been wonderful for us! We are all very good friends with each other and now many of my sisters are married. They have husbands and children and in-laws of their own, and now we're one huge family. I love it!" Katie continued.

"What does that have to do with me?" Jacob asked crossly.

"I think that you're lucky to have such good friendships with the

other boys,” Katie explained. “I think you should try to stay near them instead of running away. Does that make sense?”

Jacob nodded slowly. “I guess so. But...”

“But you wish Mr. Cavett would stay here, too?” Katie guessed.

Jacob nodded again, more emphatically this time. “Hm. I wonder...”

“You wonder, what?” Katie asked, a little nervous. In her experience, any time Jacob had an idea, usually mischief was involved.

“You said he had a job to get back to in New York. Do you think we could convince Headmaster Cavett to stay if we found him a job here in Nowhere?” Jacob asked.

Katie sighed. “Oh, Jacob. I don’t know if that would work. After all, we already have a school in Nowhere, and Miss Carroll is the teacher. We don’t need a Headmaster.”

“He could do other jobs! He’s very smart!” Jacob protested.

Katie fought back laughter. “Jacob, it’s very sweet of you to want to help. But I’m afraid the decision is up to Mr. Cavett. Come on. Why don’t we go inside? You can talk with him if you’d like.”

Again, Jacob shook his head stubbornly. “I don’t want to. I think I want to be by myself.”

Freddy let out another loud *ribbit*.

“Oh, and Freddy, of course,” Jacob quickly added.

Katie nodded. “All right. Don’t stay out here too long. And please behave yourself. You don’t want to lose privileges before the Christmas service, do you?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Jacob agreed.

Katie ruffled his hair one more time, then stood up and walked back inside the church. She saw Aaron sorting through piles of paperwork at his desk.

Katie wondered if she should say something about what Jacob had told her. Ordinarily, she would have wanted to warn Aaron that one of his pupils was so upset. But she didn’t particularly feel like talking to him. Like Jacob, Katie was hurt, too.

Meanwhile, outside, Jacob was hatching a plan to convince Aaron to stay in Nowhere with the orphans. He recruited Jonah, Callum, and the other boys to help him.

Callum looked at the other boys nervously. “Does Miss Sanders know about this plan?”

Jacob hesitated for a moment, then flashed a broad smile. “Yes, she does! She thinks it’s a great idea,” Jacob lied. He knew that Katie had said no such thing, but they didn’t have much time left. Christmas was only a few days away, and Headmaster Cavett would soon journey to New York, leaving them behind in Texas forever. It wasn’t

right, and Jacob was going to put a stop to it.

“We just need some thread, some zippers, and a little tacky...” Jacob explained. The boys hung on to his every word. Although he was one of the youngest and smallest, he was also one of the leaders of the group, never hesitant to come up with a bold plan. When Jacob talked, the others listened. And Jacob had a lot to say.

Inside the church, Aaron watched as Katie Sanders gathered her things and prepared to leave. He wanted to go to her and find out how she was doing and if she needed any help getting ready for the Christmas service. He knew that she was working with the boys on something musical, but he didn’t know any of the details. It seemed to occupy the boys, which was very helpful for him as he tried to make arrangements for their permanent home placements.

Things seemed to be coming together, even though the situation wasn’t as nicely wrapped up as he would have hoped. Lazarus Ballinger had said there was a job waiting for him, but it wouldn’t wait long. Aaron knew that if he didn’t return at once, Lazarus would find a different headmaster to take his place. He had seen many fine young men fired for not perfectly complying with Lazarus’s orders.

As he often did, Aaron wished for the days when Lazarus’s father, Robert, had run the business. Robert was an intelligent, caring, and patient man who was always generous with his employees. He had high expectations, but he also understood when they were ill or had to care for family members. He had taught Aaron the importance of holding the boys to rigorous standards. Aaron knew he wouldn’t be half the teacher or man he was without the influence of Robert in his life. In a way, Robert was the father he had never had.

That was why it stung even harder that Lazarus was such a miserable employer. He had none of his father’s good traits with the same high expectations for his staff. Aaron sometimes wished he could quit and start his own school, but he didn’t have the funds for that. As an orphan, he had no savings to speak of. Now, his meager salary from Lazarus provided a place to sleep, food on the table, and little else. Aaron didn’t complain, though; he knew there were others throughout the country who had it far worse.

But sometimes, he liked to daydream about buying the company and firing Lazarus. Aaron laughed at the thought.

Sarah Jane caught Aaron chuckling and walked up to him. “It’s good to see you smiling. I haven’t seen you laugh in a while. How are you?”

Aaron grinned. “Thank you, Sarah Jane. I was just having a ridiculous fantasy. Nothing that will ever come true, that’s for sure.”

“Well, whatever makes you smile. I’m about to turn in for the night. Did you need anything?” Sarah Jane asked. She liked to visit

the orphans and Aaron in the evenings to see if they needed any extra blankets, pillows, tea, or water.

“Thank you, Sarah Jane. We’re fine. But we appreciate your and your family’s hospitality,” Aaron said gratefully.

Sarah Jane nodded. “It’s no trouble. We help when we’re able.”

“Good night, Sarah Jane.” Aaron picked up another piece of paper and stared at it.

“Good night!” Sarah Jane left Aaron to his paperwork and went back to her family’s living quarters. She hadn’t heard a peep from Katie about her relationship with Aaron in a few days’ time. Moreover, Katie wasn’t her normal, cheerful self. Sarah Jane made a note to herself to ask Katie if anything was wrong. All of the other Sanders girls had found happiness and joy from finding her true love. Sarah Jane was determined to make sure Katie did, too.

Chapter Eight

The day before the Christmas celebration, Aaron rose earlier than usual to pack his belongings. He had arranged a ride to Austin in the middle of the night, only a few hours after Micah's Christmas service. Aaron wanted to make sure he was prepared even if the festivities were distracting.

He walked to the small closet where he had stored his belongings and pulled down his trunk. He pressed the latch to open it, but it seemed to be stuck. Aaron frowned and tugged a little harder, but the trunk wouldn't open. Frustrated, he took a deep breath and stood up a little straighter, knelt down, and tried again.

Aaron looked around for something he could use to pry the trunk open. He didn't understand. The trunk had never given him trouble before. He crept out to his makeshift office, still in his night clothes, and grabbed a letter opener. The church was silent. Aaron checked to make sure all fifteen boys were sleeping in their assigned spots in the pews. He liked to make sure none of them had run off in the middle of the night or done some other crazy thing. He knew his charges meant well, but they were growing boys and had to be constantly monitored.

The thought made him worry about who would keep an eye on them after he returned to New York. He clutched his stomach as he imagined it. Thinking too much about the boys without his influence often gave him a feeling of unease. Aaron tried to remind himself that they were no longer his charges. He would be making a fresh start at a new school, and the boys would end up with good families in Nowhere. Even though he'd had trouble, from what he'd seen of the small town, the people would rise to the occasion and help out the boys, knowing they were truly in need. Still, he didn't like to think of it.

Aaron used the letter opener as leverage to pry open the trunk.

"What in the...?" Aaron looked at his belongings in confusion. Tacky covered the inside latch of the suitcase, explaining why it hadn't opened during his earlier attempts. He hadn't brought any tacky with him. How had it ended up in his trunk?

Aaron shook his head in disgust. He didn't have time for this

nonsense. It would be a full day of work, sorting out all of his paperwork and arrangements for the boys, preparing the boys for proper behavior at the Christmas service, and ensuring he was ready for the journey to New York. The following day sounded like a busy one from his conversations with Sarah Jane and Micah. In addition to the Christmas service, there would be some type of Christmas dinner.

Aaron shuddered as he remembered some of the boys' manners at the last formal dinner they had attended in New York. He hoped he would have enough time to review basic etiquette with them before the following day. Aaron sighed. There was so much to be done. He finished cleaning the tacky from his suitcase and noted happily that none of his belongings had been ruined. He was still confused at how the tacky had ended up there in the first place, but he had to move on.

Aaron gathered all of his clothes except for a suit he would wear that day and another he would wear for Christmas. He folded them and placed them neatly in the trunk. When he had finished, he pulled on his suit, socks, and shoes. As he bent down to lace them, he realized that the shoes had been tied together with knotted string.

Suddenly, Aaron was suspicious. First, his trunk had contained tacky. Now his shoes had been tied together. He groaned. How could he have missed it? The childish prank could only have been committed by one student.

Aaron marched out to the church, still in his tied-together shoes. He didn't care about waking the boys anymore. He shuffled to the pew where Jacob was sleeping. "Jacob, wake up!" Aaron hissed.

"Cherries and plums," Jacob murmured pleasantly, still sleeping.

"Right this instant!" Aaron cried, his face growing red with frustration.

"Delicious!" Jacob smacked his lips. "What a Christmas treat!"

"There will be no Christmas if you don't wake up!" Aaron shouted. At this, many of the orphans sat up, rubbing their eyes and looking around in alarm.

"No Christmas?" Callum asked sadly.

"Who did this?" Aaron asked, pointing at his shoes.

"I can't see what you're talking about," Jonah pointed out.

Aaron tried to step toward the front of the church, but he tripped over the tied-together laces and fell to the ground. The sound finally woke Jacob. He bounced up and raced over to Aaron, helping him up. Jacob bent down to untie the laces. Aaron stood up tall, smoothing out the wrinkles in his shirt, and cleared his throat. "Someone needs to take responsibility for this at once, or I'll be forced to cancel your participation in the Christmas service."

Jacob stepped forward right away. "Please, sir, it was all my idea! Don't punish the other boys. It was my fault." Jacob hung his head. "I

understand if you say I can't sing tomorrow."

Aaron felt an unexpected lump in his throat. He was touched that Jacob had come forward right away and admitted his wrongdoing, and also that he hadn't wanted his friends to take the blame for his antics. Then he remembered the damage the boy had done to his suitcase and how he'd tripped. His face grew concerned. "Let's discuss that privately, Jacob. Everyone else, back to bed. You'll need your rest."

Jonah shook his head in confusion. He respected Headmaster Cavett, but the man had been acting very strangely for the past several days. Jonah suspected that Cavett would miss the orphans when he returned to New York. The man would never admit it, but Jonah knew it was true. Jonah sighed and made himself comfortable on the pew. As one of the oldest boys, he knew he didn't have much chance of finding a permanent home. If there was any way that Cavett could pull off a Christmas miracle and find him one, Jonah would be eternally grateful. But that seemed to have little chance of happening, so for now, he would enjoy some sleep and be grateful that he had a roof over his head.

Aaron walked Jacob outside where they could speak freely. "Jacob, I could have been hurt, and my property could have been damaged. What you did has consequences." He shook his head. His anger had disappeared and was now replaced with an ache. He was going to miss the little ball of energy. And right now, Jacob seemed devastated. It was impossible to be mad at someone who looked like that miserable. Aaron softened his tone. "What's going on, Jacob?"

Jacob buried his face in his hands. "I'm so embarrassed, Headmaster. I'm sorry for my actions."

Aaron was at a loss. "Why would you do something like that to me?"

Jacob shrugged and looked up at Aaron, his eyes shining with tears. "I didn't want you to leave."

Aaron exhaled. He hadn't expected that. "I see. But you can't do things that could hurt other people. Do you understand that? I could have tripped and gotten hurt!"

Jacob nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir. I'm very sorry. It won't happen again. Especially because you're leaving."

Aaron fought the urge to laugh. He sat down, patting the ground for Jacob to have a seat next to him. Jacob joined him. "I've tried to teach you so many things. My biggest concern is that after I leave, no one will be here to keep you in line."

Jacob shook his head. "No, sir. That won't happen because you've taught us very well. We remember everything!"

Jacob seemed so eager to please that Aaron smiled. "Thank you,

Jacob. But I'll always worry about you."

"Then don't leave," Jacob pleaded. "We would all be so happy if you decided to stay. We don't want to have another teacher. We only want you!"

Aaron sighed. "Part of being an adult means doing things that you don't necessarily want to do. You'll understand one day. My job is in New York city, and my boss told me I need to go back there. So that's what I'm going to do."

"Oh." Jacob's face fell. He looked down at the ground and picked up a stick. He used it to push around some dirt.

"That's enough serious talk for now. Let's enjoy today. Tomorrow will be very busy," Aaron said. "Up!" He leapt to his feet and offered Jacob a hand.

Jacob grinned. "Okay. What lesson are we starting with first?"

Aaron paused before he answered. "Change of plans. No lessons today."

Jacob's jaw dropped. "No lessons? This is the best day ever!" Jacob ran inside to tell the other orphans the good news.

Aaron followed behind, chuckling. The boys had made steady progress since coming to Nowhere despite the upheaval in their lives. One day off wouldn't hurt, especially since it was their last normal day together. The following day was a holiday, so there would be no time for lessons. Today was a day to make memories. Aaron's smile faltered as he realized he may never see the boys ever again.

He took a deep breath before going back inside. He had to put on a brave face for the boys. It was his last day of being their Headmaster, and he would make sure it was a great one.

"EXCUSE ME, Edna Petunia, what are you doing?" Katie asked as she entered the kitchen. Edna Petunia was bent over a pie crust, pouring the contents of a small bottle inside.

Edna Petunia straightened up and took a sip from the small bottle. "This is a special pie. Peppermint extract! Want to try?" She held the bottle out to Katie.

Katie wrinkled her nose. "No, thank you. I should get to work." Katie didn't care for Edna Petunia's peppermint sticks. She kept them hidden in her bosom and brought them out for a snack from time to time. Katie wasn't sure how Edna Petunia had converted the sticks into extract, and she didn't want to find out.

"Is there a cat in your liver?" Edna Petunia asked, frowning.

"A cat in my liver?" Katie repeated. Edna Petunia had a host of colorful phrases, but this was a new one.

“You know, a cat in your liver. You’ve been walking around with a sour expression on your face for days,” Edna Petunia complained as she finished pouring the bottle into the pie crust. She picked up a bowl of cream and began mixing it. “Seems like a cat crawled inside you and is pawing at your liver.”

“I don’t know that expression,” Katie said. “How many pies did you tell Sarah Jane we would bring?”

“Well, now I *know* you’ve got a crab in your kidneys!” Edna Petunia hooted.

Katie shook her head. She wasn’t in the mood for joking. She wanted to bake the pies and finish getting ready for the Christmas celebration the following day. She was exhausted and wanted to get a good night’s sleep before the holiday. Plus, staying focused on the preparations meant less time to spend wallowing over Aaron’s rejection.

Edna Petunia considered Katie’s question. “Five pies, I think I said. Or was it fifteen? Hm.”

“Edna Petunia! That’s a huge difference! How can you not remember?” Katie cried.

Edna Petunia shrugged. “I have a lot on my mind.”

“Now I’m going to have to spend all day in the kitchen,” Katie grumbled.

Edna Petunia frowned. “See? That’s not something you would normally say. Where’s the sunny, cheery bastard I know and love?”

“Let’s just get started.” Katie pulled out a rolling pin. “Where did you move the flour?”

Edna Petunia picked up a sack of flour from where it was hidden behind a crate of apples. She held it out to Katie, but as Katie grabbed for it, she pulled it away. “Not until you tell me what’s wrong with you. I hate seeing you so unhappy.”

“Nothing’s wrong with me,” Katie protested. She didn’t want to tell Edna Petunia about her feelings for Aaron. It would make her feel even worse to talk about it.

“All right, then,” Edna Petunia turned around and continued to mix the cream. “I guess it doesn’t matter that we took you in, fed you, clothed you, and kept you safe these past several years. You don’t need to tell me anything.”

Katie sighed. She knew Edna Petunia was trying to guilt her into telling the truth, but she wasn’t going to give in.

Edna Petunia sniffed. “All those hours spent by your bedside when you were scared after you came to Nowhere. Or the time you caught pneumonia. Or when you fell down the stairs. I guess you just don’t feel as close to me as I thought you did.”

Katie measured two cups of flour from the sack. “Edna Petunia, I

can be close to you and not tell you every bit of detail from my life.”

Edna Petunia raised her hands in the air innocently. “You don’t have to explain anything to me, dear.” She resumed her mixing. “Cletus and I only want what’s best for you.”

Before Katie realized what was happening, the words were tumbling out. “When Hope was teasing me about Aaron Cavett at dinner the other night, she was right. I do have feelings for him. And he has feelings for me, too. Or at least, I thought he did.” She set the measuring cup down on the table. “And now everything’s ruined!”

Edna Petunia stopped mixing the cream and went over to Katie. “What’s ruined, Katie?”

“Aaron is going back to New York. I thought we had a chance. I thought he wanted to—I thought he would...” Katie began to sob, unable to continue.

Edna Petunia took Katie into her arms. “There, there, dear.”

“I’m sorry I’m so emotional,” Katie said through her tears.

“It’s no crime to be emotional,” Edna Petunia soothed. “Let it out.”

“I thought he truly cared about me. But if he did, he wouldn’t go back to New York. I asked him to stay,” Katie explained. Tears continued to stream down her pretty face.

Edna Petunia hated seeing her youngest daughter feeling so blue. Of all the orphans, Katie was usually the most optimistic. Edna Petunia wanted to go to the church and give Aaron Cavett a piece of her mind, but she knew no good would come from that. Plus, Cletus had asked her to stop doing things like that. They made things harder for him as town judge. “Have you told him how you feel?”

Katie nodded. “Yes, but he didn’t listen. He’s leaving right after Christmas.”

“That’s a shame. I’m sorry, dear,” Edna Petunia said, squeezing Katie a little tighter.

Katie wiped some tears from her eyes and sniffed. “Thank you, Edna Petunia. We should get back to work, though.”

Edna Petunia grinned. “That’s right. Those pies will not bake themselves!”

“But truly,” Katie protested. “Are you sure you don’t remember how many you said you’d make?”

“I’m sure...” Edna Petunia began. “I’m sure I said I’d make some pies!”

Katie sighed. At least the pies would serve as a good distraction from her broken heart. She returned her attention to the dough. Christmas was only a few hours away.

Chapter Nine

Aaron rushed out of the mercantile. He had allowed himself to be distracted earlier by his pupils. Although they'd had a wonderful morning, playing games and laughing with one another, now he was very behind.

He had hastily scribbled a list of errands and meetings he had to attend to before the Christmas holiday. Now he was working through the list one by one. He had picked up a carton of oranges at the mercantile. Katie had explained that it was a Christmas tradition in Nowhere.

He tried to calculate how long it would take him to get to his next appointment. He had frantically scheduled appointments to try to find the boys homes. Although he had told himself he wouldn't get his hopes up, he was still wishing for a miracle.

As he walked down the street, staring at the slip of paper in his hands, he crashed into someone. "I'm so sorry!" Aaron shouted as he looked up.

"Well, this must be my lucky day. You're just the man I wanted to see!" Edna Petunia Sanders was looking at him earnestly, but her eyes sparkled with mischief as usual. She was a bit frightening.

Aaron's face turned bright red. He wasn't ready for another encounter with Nowhere's most eccentric citizen. "You've been looking for me?"

Edna Petunia put her free hand on her hip. In the other, she carried a pie tin. "I've heard you've been getting to know my youngest daughter, Katie."

Aaron swallowed hard. He really didn't want to get into this. He was going to be late. If he missed the meeting, there was no way the family would adopt one or more of the boys. "I'm afraid I have an appointment, ma'am."

"And I'm afraid you're going to have to answer some questions, Cavett!" Edna Petunia countered. "Why don't we make ourselves comfortable?" Edna Petunia walked straight toward the mercantile, pushed the door open, and waited for Aaron to follow her. "Lewis, hello!" Edna Petunia kissed her son-in-law on the cheek and handed

him the pie tin. "I ruined the pie. Put too much jam on the insides and now it burst, but I remembered how you like when that happens."

Lewis looked perplexed, but he accepted the pie. "Thank you, Edna Petunia. I sure appreciate it. Aaron, you just left here! Did you forget something?"

Aaron shook his head, unable to explain the situation.

Edna Petunia grinned. "Aaron and I are going to have a little chat. Do you have some comfortable chairs we could use?"

Lewis nodded and pulled up two overstuffed armchairs. "Here you are."

"Thank you, Lewis." Edna Petunia made herself comfortable in one of the chairs and stared at Aaron until he did the same. "Aaron, we have a problem."

"W—We do?" Aaron stammered. Something about Edna Petunia intimidated him a great deal.

"My little bastard is at home is crying, sobbing, in fact. And she's the cheeriest one!" Edna Petunia explained. "What did you *do* to her?"

Aaron's heart sank. He hated to know that he had caused Katie any pain at all. In fact, all he wanted was to make her happy. He tried to figure out a way to tell Edna Petunia this. "I didn't intend—"

Edna Petunia shook her head. "Doesn't matter what you intended. It's what you *did*."

Aaron sighed. "I told her that I was going back to New York. I have to go back. My job's there."

"Hm." Edna Petunia folded her arms.

"Excuse me?" Aaron was taken aback. It seemed like Edna Petunia didn't believe what he was telling her.

"Do you know of a place where they don't have schools?" Edna Petunia asked, catching Aaron off guard.

"A place where...why does that matter?" Aaron asked.

"Do you know of a place?" Edna Petunia repeated.

Aaron considered it. "No, I can't think of a place that doesn't have some type of school."

"Then, it seems to me a man such as yourself would be able to find a job anywhere," Edna Petunia said triumphantly. "Seems to me like this New York notion is just an excuse. So what is it, Mr. Cavett? You don't love her? You're only after one thing, and that is—"

Aaron cut her off before she could say something scandalous. "Of course I love her, Mrs. Sanders! I love her with all my heart!"

From the back of the store, Lewis arched an eyebrow at Aaron's outburst. He realized Aaron had to be talking about Katie. Lewis smiled and stroked his chin. He hoped Aaron could hold his own against Edna Petunia. The woman was tough, and Aaron seemed like a good man. He hoped Edna Petunia and Aaron could resolve whatever

was going on between them.

Aaron took a deep breath and steadied his voice. "I truly care for her. You have to believe me."

"And you have to believe me, Mr. Cavett," Edna Petunia responded. "Her father and I won't tolerate anyone causing any of our daughters pain. Especially Katie. You've made her miserable. It's the least you can do to apologize to her and restore her to her usual bubbly self. Do you understand?"

Aaron had said the phrase to his students more times than he could count, and it felt terrible to be on the receiving end of it for once. He slumped in his chair. "Yes, Mrs. Sanders. I understand."

Edna Petunia folded her hands in her lap and grinned. "Good. I'll expect Katie to be back to her usual sunny self by tomorrow." With that, she stood up and flounced out of the mercantile.

Lewis walked over to Aaron. "Are you all right?"

Aaron rubbed his temples. "I've been better."

Lewis nodded. "Edna Petunia can be a lot to take in, but she and Cletus truly love their daughters and only want what's best for them."

"Yes, I could tell that from the way she talks about Katie," Aaron agreed.

"Still, you seem pretty battered. Would you like to stay here and relax for a while? I could get you a Coca Cola," Lewis suggested.

Aaron shook his head and stood. "No, but I appreciate the offer. Thank you, Lewis. You've been a true friend." Aaron extended his hand.

Lewis shook it and clapped Aaron on the back. "It'll be a shame when you go back to New York. You're a good man. We were lucky to have you here, even if it was only for a short amount of time. I'm sure that your students will make you proud."

Aaron smiled. "I certainly hope so. Only time will tell. In fact, that's where I'm headed now—to meet a family and ask them to take in some of the boys."

"That's wonderful. I hope you're successful," Lewis said.

"Thank you, Lewis. I'll see you tomorrow at the Christmas celebration." Aaron hurried out of the mercantile, hoping he wouldn't be late.

Three hours later, Aaron was seated in front of Howard Fitzsimmons, proprietor of the town auction house. He was the last person in Nowhere Aaron had been able to schedule a meeting with.

Mr. Fitzsimmons picked at a piece of lint on the arm of his chair. "I don't understand what you're asking me."

"Mr. Fitzsimmons, these are smart, capable young men. Under the right circumstances, they'll excel. I'm sure of it," Aaron said passionately.

"But what am I supposed to do about it?" Mr. Fitzsimmons barked.

"I'd like you to take in an orphan. Or more than one. Maybe three. Or five. Or...all fifteen?" Aaron asked hesitantly. This was where it always fell apart. No one had the space, the means, or the wherewithal to take on a band of orphans.

Sure enough, Mr. Fitzsimmons spluttered indignantly. "Take in fifteen orphans? Can you imagine? This place would be filthy!"

"I've taught them life skills, including cleaning," Aaron offered hopefully.

Mr. Fitzsimmons stood up. "I think it's best you leave, young man. I can't help you."

Aaron sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that."

Mr. Fitzsimmons escorted him to the door. "Merry Christmas!"

"You, too, sir," Aaron said. Mr. Fitzsimmons began to close the door, and Aaron hopped outside so it wouldn't hit him. "And a Merry Christmas to you, too," Aaron whispered bitterly once he was outside.

He'd had a bad feeling about the meeting with Mr. Fitzsimmons, but he was desperate. He would meet with anyone willing to give him time.

Aaron looked at his watch. It would be dark soon, and he wanted to get back to the church to make sure the boys were behaving themselves, but there was one more stop he had to make.

Aaron gathered the reins of the horse he'd borrowed from Micah and set off for the Sanders' house. He wasn't sure if Katie would agree to see him, but he had to at least try.

As he rode, he imagined what his life would be like if he didn't have to go to New York. It was almost painful to think about it. He'd marry Katie, buy a plot of land in Nowhere, and start a family. Ever since he was a small boy, growing up in the orphanage, he had longed for a family he could call his own. His students had been the closest thing to it, and now he was leaving them.

Tears stung Aaron's eyes, surprising him as he approached the Sanders home. He wiped them away roughly, trying to compose himself for what he had to do. He hitched his horse to a post outside the house and walked to the door slowly. His stomach was doing somersaults. He wasn't sure why he was so nervous, but he thought it likely had something to do with Edna Petunia's lecture earlier that day. He also was terrified at the prospect of hurting Katie even more than he already had.

Still, he gathered his courage and knocked on the door. He let out a sigh of relief when Cletus Sanders opened the door.

"Aaron! What are you doing here, son? We're about to eat dinner," Cletus told him. "Would you like to join us?"

Aaron shook his head. "I wouldn't want to impose, sir. Thank you

for the kind offer. May I speak to Katie, please?"

"I suppose that depends on what Katie wants," Cletus said thoughtfully. "Stay put for a minute." Cletus disappeared into the house.

Aaron paced on the front porch, hoping Katie would agree to see him. Edna Petunia was right. He had to apologize and make up with her. It wasn't right to leave town with her so angry at him.

After what felt like hours, Katie appeared at the door. Her expression was neutral.

"Could we take a walk?" Aaron asked.

Katie crossed her arms across her chest. "It's going to be dark soon."

"In that case, may I come in?" Aaron tried.

Katie sighed, but stepped aside to let Aaron into the house.

Aaron followed her into the formal parlor, where Katie took a seat in a comfortable-looking armchair. Aaron sat on the sofa. He tried to meet her eye.

Katie looked at the ground. "You'd better make this quick. I have a few more pies to bake."

"I'm sorry I hurt you," Aaron said simply. He waited for Katie to return his gaze.

Katie looked up, surprised. "I didn't expect you to say that."

"I ran into Edna Petunia," Aaron explained.

Katie jumped up. "You're only here because Edna Petunia yelled at you?"

Aaron stood and grabbed Katie's hands. "No! That's not why I'm here. And she didn't yell at me, exactly...it was more like a scolding."

Katie shook her head. "I don't have time for this. You're leaving in a day and a half."

"Katie, please. Let me stay. Let me make it up to you. I could help you bake," Aaron pleaded.

Katie scoffed. "Do you even know how to bake?"

Aaron shrugged. "No, but I want to learn."

Katie frowned. "I can't teach you to bake in only a few hours. We'd need more time than that."

Aaron sighed. "Katie, I know I ruined things between us. I'll be sorry for the rest of my life about that. But I want you to know how badly I feel. And that I really cared for you—I still care for you, in fact. Will you hear me out?"

"I don't know," Katie said quietly, but she stared up at Aaron's perfect face. She knew Aaron didn't realize how handsome he was. He never took pains about his appearance or admired himself in mirrors, but he was the most attractive man she'd ever seen. Even though she knew looks weren't important in the long run, she was tempted by

Aaron's chiseled face and muscular build. Her heart hurt as she envisioned the children she could have had with this man.

"Please," Aaron continued.

Katie groaned, then nodded. "I suppose I can listen for a little. But then I have to get back to the kitchen."

"Of course," Aaron replied. "Katie, you're a wonderful young woman. You're everything I've always wanted in a partner. But I have to set a good example for my students. I have a job and responsibilities in New York. I wish things had worked out differently. I'll always regret not staying here and being with you. But I have a duty, and I must see it through."

A tear threatened to roll down Katie's cheek, but she looked down and wiped it away. "I understand," she whispered.

Aaron was close enough to Katie that his face was practically touching hers. If he bent down a fraction of an inch, they'd be kissing. Aaron couldn't believe how badly his body wanted that, but he couldn't do that to Katie. It wouldn't be right.

Katie's heart fluttered as she stared at Aaron, close enough to touch lips. She dared him to kiss her with her eyes, but he wouldn't. Katie loved being so close to him. She could smell him, a strong, masculine scent, and practically feel his body pressing against hers. She giggled as she began to imagine engaging in improper activities with Aaron.

As soon as he saw Katie laughing, Aaron was unable to resist. She was too sweet and kind and warm. He bent down and kissed her passionately, feeling dizzy.

Katie forgot about her surroundings and kissed Aaron back with all the energy she had in her body. When she was with Aaron, she felt like everything sparkled with light and beauty. There were endless possibilities for the future. Then, suddenly, she found herself pulling away.

Aaron looked at her, hurt. "What's wrong?"

"Aaron! Get control of yourself!" Katie said sternly.

A look of horror crossed Aaron's face. "I am very sorry, Katie. I acted very inappropriately this evening. I didn't mean to do that."

Katie smiled. "It's all right. I realized that you're right."

"I am?" Aaron seemed confused.

"You have responsibilities in New York. I understand that. It makes me sad, but you have to live by your values and do what you teach your students to do. I'm sorry to see you go, but I can appreciate your perspective," Katie said. She surprised herself with her calm and peacefulness. She loved Aaron, but she realized that she couldn't have him.

"That's very kind of you, Katie. I don't deserve your

understanding,” Aaron said honestly. This proved further what an incredible young woman Katie was.

Katie shrugged. “It’s fine. But you probably should go now.”

Aaron hesitated. “I wish I could stay.”

“I know,” Katie said sadly. “I wish you could, too.”

Aaron stared deep into Katie’s eyes. He wanted more than anything to stay with her, to make her his wife. But he couldn’t ask her to leave her family. He of all people realized how lucky Katie had been to find a wonderful, loving family. If he’d been in her position, he wouldn’t have left, either. Plus, it would be impractical. They’d have to get married right away. He was due back in New York in a matter of days. It was hopeless. He cleared his throat and stood up straight. “I’ll see you tomorrow at church, right?”

“If I wake up on time. I might be up all night making those pies,” Katie joked.

“Do you need any help? I may not be able to bake, but I would be happy to measure or pour ingredients,” Aaron suggested.

Katie shook her head. “I would like that, but it’s too tempting. I don’t think we should be alone together anymore. You’ve seen what happens.”

Aaron sighed. “You’re right. As much as I wish things were different, they aren’t. I’ll go.”

Katie walked Aaron to the door. “Thank you for stopping by. I’m glad you didn’t leave before we resolved things. I was upset after our last conversation.”

“I feel the same way,” Aaron told her. “Thank you, Katie.” He reached out and tucked a stray piece of her hair behind her ear. “I’ll never forget you.”

Katie’s body responded to Aaron’s touch, fighting desperately to get closer to him, but she stayed where she was. “Good night, Aaron.” She closed the door, then turned and slumped against it, sinking to the floor. Her heart pounded. She knew she was doing the right thing in letting Aaron go. Why did it feel so wrong?

Chapter Ten

“Jasper, get down from there!”

“Merry Christmas, Uncle Timothy!”

“Amy, make sure you’re holding the baby’s head up...”

“Who wants a peppermint stick?”

Aaron looked around the church in amazement. The space was filled with people, and nearly all of them seemed to be related to Katie in some way.

The boys were having a ball. They played with Katie’s nieces and nephews, laughing and frolicking around the church. Aaron hoped everyone would quiet down and behave themselves for the church service. Fortunately, they would be eating after church, which meant no one had consumed any of the sixteen pies Edna Petunia and Katie carried.

“One for good luck,” Edna Petunia winked at Aaron as she waved one in front of his nose.

Sarah Jane ran around the room, trying to find space for more pies. “I thought you said you were bringing five, Edna Petunia, not sixteen!” Sarah Jane complained.

Katie grinned. “Well, better to have too many than not enough!”

Theresa, rubbing her protruding stomach, came up to admire the pies. “Don’t worry, Sarah Jane. There won’t be many leftovers once I’m finished eating.” She turned to Aaron. “I’m eating for two,” Theresa explained before she returned to tending to the babies her husband, Cody, carried in a large bassinet.

Another of Katie’s sisters, Hope, giggled. “As if you couldn’t tell she was pregnant! She’s huge!”

Aaron smiled politely, not wanting to say anything that would offend any of the Sanders family members. He looked again at the infants in the bassinet, confused. “Are those her children, too?” The babies seemed too small for her to have another one on the way, but he wasn’t as well-versed in child rearing as the others seemed to be. The babies must have been older than they appeared.

Katie nodded. “They are, but she didn’t give birth to them. She adopted them after finding them on the steps of the schoolhouse,

actually!"

"Someone left those babies on the steps to a schoolhouse?" Aaron asked, horrified. He was glad that one of the Sanders girls had been the one to find them. He knew the babies were in good hands now.

"Yes. We never found out who the birth parents are. So Theresa and Cody married and adopted them," Katie explained. "Now they're expecting another baby, so they'll have their hands full." She felt wistful as she watched Theresa cradle one of the twins. Would she ever get the chance to do that with her own child?

"Wow," Aaron said. Just then, a young girl walked up to them.

"Aunt Katie! You look beautiful!" Amy Brooks said admiringly.

Katie bent down and gave Amy a big hug. "So do you, Amy. I love your hair." She touched the red velvet bow that adorned Amy's head. "This is my niece, Amy," Katie introduced.

"Hi, Amy," Aaron said kindly. "What do you want for Christmas this year?"

Amy smiled. "I want our whole family to be healthy and happy." She spotted one of her brothers and skipped away.

Aaron was touched by the small girl's words. "What a remarkable child."

Katie watched her niece playing with the other children. "She really is. Her mother and father died from illness a few years back, so she's very sensitive to matters of health. Who knows, maybe she'll be a doctor one day, like Dr. Iris!"

"If her parents died, how is she related to you?" Aaron asked.

"My sister Betsy married her older brother, Charles. Since then, they've basically raised her as their own. Charles is much older than his siblings, so it worked out." Just then, a man came up and wrapped Katie in a big, one-armed hug.

Aaron felt jealous of the man coming so close to Katie. Then he startled as he realized the man only had one arm. In the place of where his other arm should have been, he wore a hook.

"Aaron Cavett, this is my brother-in-law, Will Hart. Fastest roper you've ever seen," Katie said proudly.

"Pleasure. I've heard a lot about the work you're doing to place these boys in good homes. Wish we could take the whole lot ourselves, but we haven't got enough room. I hope you find homes for all of them," Will said genuinely.

Aaron smiled. Will was smooth and easy to talk to. He had thought he would feel uncomfortable chatting with a man who had a hook in place of an arm, but instead it felt completely natural.

Will checked around the room. "I think I lost Hattie and the baby again. I'll see you later, after the service." He rushed off to find his wife.

Aaron blinked. "I don't know how you keep track of all of your sisters and all their children and husbands."

Katie shrugged. "Every single one has his or her own personality. It's a lot of fun!"

"I can imagine it would be." Aaron watched as the cousins laughed and carried on together. "When I was little, a big family like this was what I always dreamed of."

"Me, too," Katie agreed. She became upset as she thought about how Aaron was leaving after the Christmas celebration, but she tried to stay calm. She hoped he would like the surprises they had planned for him.

"*Sh!*" Sarah Jane hissed.

Around the room, pockets of children and adults grew quiet while other groups continued talking. Finally, a loud, shrill whistle hushed the room.

Edna Petunia turned to Sarah Jane, looking very pleased with herself. "Go ahead, dear."

Sarah Jane looked sternly around the room. "Let's all be quiet and respectful as we begin the Christmas service."

Everyone nodded in agreement, and Micah walked to the front of the church. "Family and friends, Merry Christmas to all of you, and welcome to our community. I'm so glad all of you are here tonight."

As Micah spoke, Aaron marveled at the warmth and comfort he felt inside the church. Everyone was so kind and supportive. He had never been in a town that felt that way before. He certainly didn't feel that in New York.

As the service went on, Jacob nudged Katie. "I'm nervous."

"It's normal to be nervous," Katie reassured him. "That means you want to do a good job. I know you can do it."

Jacob nodded, but he didn't seem sure. Katie patted his knee.

Soon, it was Katie's turn to sing. She rose from her spot in the pew and ventured to the front of the room. As she sang, her voice spread and filled the entire church.

Cletus closed his eyes. It was true that his daughter had the voice of an angel. She had a true gift.

Aaron always loved hearing Katie sing, but that evening, her voice brought tears to his eyes. Knowing it was the last time he would hear her sing made it even more bittersweet.

As Katie came to the middle of the song, she pointed out into the audience. One by one, each of the fifteen Robert Ballinger Institution orphans joined her at the front of the church. In unison, they began to accompany her, singing in delicate harmony with Katie's remarkable voice.

Aaron was blown away. More tears sprang from his eyes. He hadn't

realized any of his boys could sing like this. Katie's voice and teaching had elevated them to a level he had never dreamed of. Aaron also recognized the tune. It was his favorite church hymn. Aaron shook his head in wonder.

Katie saw Aaron in the crowd, looking amazed at the performance. She smiled at him, hoping that he would see that she was looking only at him. Although she understood why, she hated that he had to leave. She would never forget Aaron or the love that they'd shared.

As she sang, Katie wondered if she'd ever be able to move on. Although she didn't like the prospect of it, she hoped that she would be able to fall in love with someone else. She still wanted to become a mother and raise a wriggly, happy group of children. It was all she had ever wanted. It wouldn't be with Aaron; that much was clear. But she hoped that future awaited her.

After church, Gertrude followed the children around, making sure they weren't disturbing the presents scattered beneath the Christmas trees the Bartons had put up at the back of the church. "No peeking!"

Jed, Gertrude's freewheeling husband, trailed behind her, winking at the children and shaking the boxes to try to guess what was inside.

Gertrude whirled around, catching Jed in the act. "Jed! You're as bad as our children!"

Jed simply grinned and kissed her on the lips. "I'm lucky that I'm married to you, then. You're so good, you balance me out!"

Opal chased after her twins. "I see those chocolates—you'll spoil your appetite!"

"Have you seen Aaron?" Evelyn asked Katie. "Frank's looking for him. Needs to have a word."

Katie blushed. "Why are you assuming I know where Aaron is?"

Evelyn laughed at Katie's expression. "You don't have to play games. You know how our sisters are. Word travels fast. We all know that you and Aaron are involved."

Katie shook her head sadly. "He's leaving, though."

Just then, Sarah Jane called for attention again. "We are so thankful to the Lord for this family, this food, and this fellowship. May He bless us with another wonderful holiday."

Everyone murmured their approval.

At last, Jed called, "Let's eat!"

Everyone made a mad dash for the food except for Katie. She was curious about Evelyn's question. Where was Aaron? Katie planned to give him his gift as soon as dinner was over.

She looked around for Edna Petunia. The woman somehow seemed to know where everyone was at all times. But for some reason, Edna Petunia was nowhere to be found, either. Katie's stomach rumbled. She got in line with the others, waiting for her turn to load her plate

with holiday treats.

Katie took a seat next to her sister Betsy at the tables Sarah Jane and Micah had set up inside the church. "Have you seen Edna Petunia?"

Betsy shook her head. "It's hard to keep track of anyone in this family! Why are you looking for her?"

"No reason," Katie said. She began to eat her dinner. Each of the Sanders sisters had made a different main course, side dish, or dessert, and the result was an incredible feast of diverse foods. Katie had taken a small amount of nearly everything, hoping to taste it all.

Katie looked for Aaron all through dinner, but couldn't find him. She spotted Edna Petunia speaking to Martha and Minnie and approached the group. "Edna Petunia, have you seen Aaron? He didn't already leave, did he?"

Edna Petunia frowned and looked around the church.

Just then, Cletus stepped to the front of the church. "Attention, everyone! Let the gift-giving begin!"

To Katie's relief, Aaron walked back into the church, talking to Jed. She wondered what they had been doing outside.

The younger children ran around the church, searching for gifts with their names on them. The older children went a bit slower, but were still excited. Katie decided it was time for her announcement. "Each of us families picked the name of one of the orphans. Each one of you is getting a gift!"

The Sanders sisters and their spouses, Edna Petunia and Cletus, and Katie took their gifts out and approached the recipients.

Katie walked up to Aaron and handed him the small package, wrapped in brown paper. "Merry Christmas," she whispered. "We're all going to miss you so much."

Aaron opened his mouth to say something, but stopped. "You didn't have to get me anything."

Katie smiled. "I know."

Aaron lifted the paper, taking care not to tear it. He removed the paper and held up a leather-bound book. "Thank you. I can't accept such a fine gift."

"You're going to have to, though," Katie pointed to the spine. Aaron's initials were engraved on the book.

"Thank you. I'll put it to good use," Aaron said, still in disbelief that after everything, Katie could be so kind and thoughtful toward him.

"There's more," Katie added. "Take a look inside."

On the inside cover of the book, each of Aaron's fifteen pupils had scrawled his name and a message to Aaron. Once again, Aaron was overcome by emotion. "I love it," he whispered, pulling Katie in for a

hug. "Thank you."

Katie stepped back before she could fall under Aaron's spell yet again. "You're welcome."

Katie made her way through the crowd, spotting Alice and her husband, Mark. They were watching Callum open his gift, a toy train car.

"I love it!" Callum shouted, excitement dancing in his eyes. He grabbed the toy and ran off to show it to Jacob.

Katie laughed. "Seeing them smile makes me so happy."

"It's all because of you," Alice told Katie. "This was a wonderful idea."

Katie shook her head. "We've all done a lot to make this work. I only hope that they'll find permanent homes here."

Alice and Mark exchanged a look.

"What's wrong?" Katie asked, suddenly concerned.

"Nothing at all!" Alice said brightly. "Oh, hi, Hattie!" Alice waved across the room toward Hattie.

Katie frowned. Something was wrong. Alice was acting very strangely.

Sure enough, Hattie crossed the room to greet Alice and Katie. "Oh, Katie, your singing was just beautiful! As always. You really are something," Hattie complimented.

"Thank you," Katie said warily.

Hattie looked around the room, like there was something specific she was checking for.

"Hattie, what are you looking for?" Katie asked.

Suddenly, Hattie dumped the glass of milk she was holding all over Katie's dress. "Oh, my! I'm so clumsy! I'm sorry, Katie."

Katie squirmed as the cold milk soaked through her blouse.

"Does anyone have a towel?" Alice called, but didn't move to find one.

Sarah Jane flew over. "Oh, Katie, come with me, I'll get you all cleaned up!"

Katie breathed a sigh of relief. Sarah Jane would take care of this.

Sarah Jane led Katie to the living quarters and pulled her into the bedroom. "The only problem is, all my clothes are in the wash. Except for what I'm wearing, of course." She peeked into her wardrobe. "Hm. The only thing I have...but no, you won't want to wear this!" She pulled out a white wedding dress.

Katie's eyes filled with tears. It was too much. "But that's the dress you wore, and Ruby, and Mrs. Hayes..."

Sarah Jane bit her lip. "I'm so sorry. It's truly the only thing I own that's clean. Would that be all right?"

Katie shrugged. "It will be warmer than this wet blouse, that's for

certain.”

“Hang on a moment,” Sarah Jane said. She disappeared and returned a few minutes later with Penny.

Penny looked at the dress critically. “Let me make a few adjustments.” She pulled out a needle and thread and began altering the dress to fit Katie better, while Katie was still wearing it.

“What is going on?” Katie wondered out loud. “You’re *all* acting so strange! I’m only going to wear this dress for a few hours. It doesn’t have to fit me perfectly.”

Sarah Jane and Penny looked at each other and laughed. Katie sighed.

Ten minutes later, she walked out into the church.

Aaron Cavett stepped to the front of the church. “I want to thank everyone for all the work you’ve done on behalf of the boys. Thanks to you, each and every one of them will have a permanent home.”

Katie’s jaw dropped. She couldn’t believe Aaron had found homes for all the orphans. She knew he had been working very hard on it, but Nowhere was a small town. She couldn’t believe everything had worked out.

“The even better news is that even though the boys will live in separate homes, they’ll be related by a common thread. The Sanders family. Everyone in this town has been wonderful, but you all have been especially gracious and welcoming. Thank you,” Aaron continued.

Katie looked puzzled.

“But there’s one more announcement I have to make, and it’s really more of a question. Katie Sanders, will you marry me?”

Everyone turned to stare at Katie. She felt like the room was spinning. Tears clouded her eyes as she stepped forward toward Aaron.

Dorothy stuffed a bouquet of flowers into her hand.

Edna Petunia clasped a gold bracelet around her wrist. “I love you, dear.”

“I love you, too,” Katie replied. She couldn’t believe what was happening. Was her Christmas wish actually coming true?

Katie looked at Aaron in amazement. “What’s going on? And where have you been all night?”

Aaron looked sheepish. “Your gifts gave me a great idea. What if the Sanders family adopted one orphan each? Everyone has enough room for one extra person, and the family is so close that the boys will feel like they’re still being raised together. Oh, there’s one more thing.”

Katie put a hand up. “Wait. You said each family...are Edna Petunia and Cletus taking a boy, too?”

Aaron shook his head. "No. But if you agree to it, we are."

Jacob emerged from where he was hiding behind Aaron's back. "Can we be a family?"

Katie's eyes brimmed with happy tears. This was all she had ever wanted, and it was all happening.

"Well, what do you say?" Aaron looked at Katie expectantly.

Katie grinned. "I say, yes!"

Aaron signaled to Micah, who walked to accompany them at the front of the church.

Micah smiled proudly. "Family and friends, we are gathered here to witness the marriage of Aaron Cavett and Katie Sanders."

Katie stared up at Aaron. She couldn't believe that she was marrying him. Then she realized a big problem. "Stop! Wait! Stop!"

Aaron looked crestfallen. Katie whispered in his ear. "Where are we going to live? Are we going back to New York?"

Aaron laughed in relief. "So much has happened in the past hour that I haven't been able to properly explain! Jed and I are going to start a school for music. I'll be Headmaster and he'll be the teacher. It will be a new and different job, but I'll get to stay here and watch the boys as they grow up, and we'll get to be near your wonderful family."

Katie smiled, so grateful that Aaron understood her connection to the family. "Our family," she corrected.

They held hands and the family cheered in approval. Micah held his hands up. "Quiet, please! We still have a ceremony to finish!"

A few minutes later, Micah nodded to Aaron and Katie. "I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Screams, whistles, and cheers erupted from the crowd. As Aaron and Katie kissed, she felt like everything was finally falling into place. Her Christmas wish had come true after all!

Epilogue

Katie hugged Edna Petunia, taking Jacob's hand to leave. "I knew you'd want to know right away so you could start making quilts for your newest grandbastard."

"I can't believe my baby is going to have a baby!" Edna Petunia was beaming, so pleased about the news of a new baby in the family. There were always new babies in the family, but there could never be enough to please Edna Petunia.

Katie grinned as she opened the front door to leave, surprised to see Abner standing on the doorstep, his hand raised to knock. "I'll leave you two to visit. See you soon, Edna Petunia!"

"Yes, you will!" Edna Petunia looked at the young man who had tried to court several of her daughters. "Are you here to see me, Abner? You know all my girls are married and out of the house, don't you?"

Abner sighed and nodded. "Actually, that's why I'm here."

Edna Petunia frowned, but opened the door wider as she watched Katie and Jacob get into a buggy to drive away. "How can I help you, Abner?" She led him into the informal parlor at the front of the house, and took a seat herself. "You seem troubled." Edna Petunia had never had a great fondness for Abner, because she hadn't thought he was right for any of her bastards. Now that they were all married off and doing well, she felt a bit sorry for the young man.

"Well, it's like this...I always thought I'd marry one of your beautiful daughters, but now that they're all married, I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I feel like since you let them all marry other men, you should help me to find a wife."

Edna Petunia stared at him for a minute. "Are you daft? Why is it my job?"

"I'm really not sure, but it has to be. I don't really have the skills it takes to court a woman, because I'm so terribly awkward, but I want to be married. So you need to help me. No one else will!"

Edna Petunia sighed. "I see your point. I do have a friend that I correspond with in Massachusetts who is in the mail-order bride business. I'm sure I could find you a wife." She got up and waddled to

a writing desk, taking a sheet of paper and a pencil. "Write a letter saying what you want in a woman, and I'll make sure my friend gets it. I'm sure between the two of us, we could match up all of the unmarried men in town."

Abner didn't look at her as he wrote his letter as fast as he could. "I can't wait to see who comes to marry me. Will it take long?"

"I have no idea. We'll learn together, and if this works out well, I'll hang out my shingle. Edna Petunia's Mail-Order Brides. It has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am," Abner said, not paying any attention to her as he signed his name with a flourish. "It surely does."

About the Author

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